CAREY SCHOFIELD

MESRINE

The Life and Death of a Supercrook

he story of a killer
hey couldn't
hold!

A Penguin Special
Mesrine – The Life and Death of a Supercrook

Since graduating from Clare College, Cambridge, three years ago, with a degree in English, Carey Schofield has worked as an editorial assistant and ghost writer.

She achieved notoriety at Cambridge by impersonating Elizabeth Taylor at the Edinburgh Festival and thereby causing a complete standstill of the traffic in Princes Street. Her reputation as an impersonator increased still further after she held auditions in Cambridge, disguised as the film director, Kurosawa.

She now lives in Kilburn.

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I

Everything was ready.

The tall, dark bearded man left his studio flat on the third floor of 35–37 rue Belliard. He locked the door carefully behind him. Beside him was his girlfriend. He was carrying a suitcase and a couple of overcoats. She was holding a small white poodle. After getting out of the lift on the ground floor he wished the concierge a pleasant weekend. The concierge nodded silently. He had been interviewed by the police the previous morning at his home. He knew that they had evacuated everyone else in the building. The amiable man was Jacques Mesrine, the most wanted criminal in Europe. It was 2.58 p.m. on the afternoon of Friday, 2 November 1979.

Outside, a gasman doing some repairs in the road looked up at the couple leaving the house, before returning to his work. It was a pleasant day in late autumn, the pale sun was shining through the leafless trees which lined the road. The couple walked three hundred yards to where a new B.M.W. was parked. Courteously Mesrine opened the passenger-door for his girlfriend, Sylvie Jeanjacquot, before putting the suitcase and coats into the boot. Then he got in, carefully arranged Sylvie's bag between his feet and fastened his seat-belt. As they drove off a taxi passed them. At the end of the road, they turned left, crossed a railway bridge and stopped at a junction with a main road.

A blue lorry, a tarpaulin over the back, drew up alongside the B.M.W. The driver signalled to Mesrine that he wanted to cut across him to turn right. Mesrine waved him on and then noticed with apprehension that another lorry had drawn up behind him. The first lorry drove in front of him and stopped suddenly, right in the path of the B.M.W. From under the tarpaulin four men appeared, each with a gun levelled at the car. There was a split second's pause before twenty-one bullets crashed through the windscreen, tearing into Mesrine. A car drew up alongside the B.M.W. The man in the passenger seat leant out and calmly fired a shot into the side of Mesrine's head, like an officer finishing off a condemned man after execution by firing squad.

It was all over. There was no possibility of Mesrine's survival, nor was there intended to be. The bullets were high-velocity, coated with brass in order to penetrate the windscreen. The outer layer broke off at the initial impact and they exploded when they hit Mesrine. The lead fragments tore through tissue and nerves.

After the sudden burst of fire there was a pause. It was as if no one knew what to do next. Then the passenger door opened and Sylvie Jeanjacquot ran out, her wig askew. She was screaming hysterically, 'You animals! Why did you shoot my dog?' It was not only the dog who was hurt. One bullet had hit Sylvie in the head and two more had hit her in the arm. She collapsed on the cobblestones in the middle of the road. The police surged around the car, embracing each other like footballers immediately after a goal had been scored. They were talking excitedly about the operation, grinning like schoolboys.

Someone remembered to call for one of the ambulances that were waiting nearby to take Sylvie away. Another reported enthusiastically that he had seen Mesrine's expression when he realized that he was trapped: 'He looked as if he was suffocating. His eyes were bursting out of his head.'

Very quickly, from the neighbouring streets, hundreds of policemen surged into the Place de Clignancourt, cordoning the area off from the gathering crowds who had come to see what the shooting was about.

At the still, quiet centre of all the seething excitement, Mesrine lay slumped forward in the car, held up only by his seat-belt. Blood trickled from his badly lacerated face and from his chest, on to his legs and the seat. At his feet was a black bag containing hand-grenades. No one moved him. No one was to touch him for an hour.

The operation had gone exactly as planned by Lucien Aimé-Blanc, the boss of the crack O.C.R.B. – the national squad dealing with serious crimes. For two and a half days, ever since Mesrine's hideout had been discovered, policemen disguised as taxi-drivers, as housewives going shopping and as prostitutes looking for business, had been watching the flat, waiting for him to appear. In a nearby street the two lorries and the car involved in the ambush had waited, a firing-squad ready to be called up.

Aimé-Blanc spoke on the radio to Maurice Bouvier, France's top policeman, who had been directing all aspects of the hunt for Mesrine. The message was brief: 'Mesrine has been killed. No casualties on our side.'

Bouvier breathed a sigh of relief. It was news he had been waiting for for eighteen months, ever since Mesrine's dramatic escape from the top-security wing of the La Santé prison. Throughout those eighteen months Mesrine had been the dominating feature of their lives. Elated, Bouvier picked up the telephone to speak to M. Bonnet, the Minister of the Interior.

Five minutes later a limousine was taking M. Bonnet from the Ministry of the Interior to the Elysée Palace a hundred yards down the Faubourg St Honoré. Aware of the intense interest that Giscard d'Estaing had been taking in the affair, Bonnet himself was going to break the great news to the President of the Republic. All programmes on French radio and television were suddenly interrupted with the news that Public Enemy Number One had been shot dead.

For the last year and a half the public had followed with intense fascination the gangster's career: the escapes, bank robberies, interviews with the press. Despite the increasing numbers of policemen who were put onto the case, until nearly the entire force responsible for serious crimes was after one man, there was little evidence that he would be caught. Now he was dead. If the President had resigned the news could not have created more excitement. The suicide of a Cabinet Minister was driven from the front pages of the newspapers.

Sabrina, Mesrine's 18-year-old daughter, arrived at the scene. She had heard the news of the shooting on her car radio. Pushing through the crowds, trying to avoid the police, she reached her father's car. He was still strapped in his seat. She had been unable to believe the news until that moment. Now she was helped away from the car, the avuncular arm of a policeman round her shoulders.

Slowly the wild exhilaration of the police subsided, and they returned to the business of dealing with the car. At 4.20, an hour after the shooting, Mesrine was unbuckled from his seat-belt. Robert Broussard, the policeman who had been his chief public adversary for six years, helped to lift him gently from the car. It was Broussard who covered his shattered face with a blanket. Mesrine was laid on a stretcher, carried into an ambulance and driven off to the Institut Médico-Légal. The car was searched. Explosive experts gingerly opened the boot. Inside were two suitcases and a number of children's teddy-bears. The suitcases were cautiously examined and the bears dismembered

to see if any weapons were hidden in them. The car was then hoisted on to the back of a lorry and carried away.

Five hundred yards away, the police had begun investigating the hide-out at 35–37 rue Belliard. On breaking into the flat they were horrified to see a piece of cotton stretched across the foot of the door between the doorposts. Immediately they backed away, fearing that it was connected to explosives. There was no explosion. They advanced slowly. It turned out that Mesrine had placed it there so that he could tell if anyone had entered the flat while he was out.

Straight ahead of them a coat was hanging from the ceiling, fixed so that anyone looking through the key-hole would think that a man was standing in front of the door. Nearby there was a couch, with a thick foam rubber mattress tied to it, which Mesrine could use as a defence if the police started firing through the door. A rope, sufficiently long to reach the road, was tied to a bar across one window at the back of the flat, to enable him to leave the flat in a hurry. The whole flat was prepared and equipped for a siege. There was also an arsenal: a machine gun, a rifle, several revolvers, some gas canisters, and a vast amount of ammunition. And in one of the cupboards there were eight bars of gold and 200,000 francs.

The tenant of the flat was lying on a marble slab in the police mortuary. On the door was a notice: 'Until further orders Mesrine will not be receiving visitors.' The notice was supposed to discourage the queues of policemen who wanted to see the body of their enemy.

In the Ministry of the Interior Broussard was washing his hands before attending the Press conference. All the 'patrons' of the police force were there: Maurice Bouvier, Director of the Police Judiciaire, who had stage-managed the hunt for Mesrine for the previous three months, Lucien Aimé-Blanc, head of the O.C.R.B., who had spotted the clue that led the police to Mesrine, Broussard, head of the crack 'anti-gang squad', Mesrine's long-term adversary, whose marksmen had shot him.

Bouvier explained that they had had to shoot first, without warning, because they knew that Mesrine was carrying grenades which he would not have hesitated to use. Lucien Aimé-Blanc said that he would have preferred to make a 'clean' arrest, perhaps in Mesrine's flat, but no one had dared to risk it. But the dominant feeling at the press conference was one of triumph.

Congratulations had poured in – from the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice.

Charly Bauer, Mesrine's last accomplice, who had seen him two days before, heard the news as he entered a radio shop. It was obvious that if the police had discovered Mesrine's hideout, they would almost certainly have discovered his. Instead of making a bolt for it, he wandered mournfully back to his flat where the police were waiting for him. As they put the handcuffs on, he said, 'The death of "*Le Grand*" has broken me.'

A week after his execution, Jacques Mesrine was buried next to his father in the cemetery in Clichy. Two hundred people attended the Requiem Mass. In the little church of St Vincent de Paul, the ancient cry of the psalmist rang out: 'If thou, O Lord should mark our iniquities, Lord, who would survive.' A policeman in uniform coughed.

Mesrine's mother watched tearfully as his children threw single flowers on the light oak coffin as it was lowered into the grave. Among the inscriptions on the wreaths were 'To a man with respect' and 'To my father'. The police were disconcerted to see one marked from '*Le bande du Rex*'. They feared it might be from a new gang, somehow connected with Mesrine, until they discovered that the Rex was a café in Saint-Ouen where a band of punk rockers had followed Mesrine's career with hero-worship. Among the crowd was a middle-aged woman dressed in a black cape. She carried a book about the Paris Commune and a spray of lilac, and said to anyone who would listen that Mesrine was a true anarchist, one of the last.

Two days afterwards, during the night, bombs exploded in two prisons and a police station. A telephone call to the police claimed that they had been placed there by the 'Committee Jacques Mesrine'. Mesrine's mother and daughter started legal proceedings against the police for manslaughter.

So ended the career of Jacques Mesrine. The authorities were anxious to claim a great success for the police. But although the death had brought an end to the public ridicule to which they had been subjected, it hardly served to vindicate them. If an entire police force pits its strength against the wits of one man, it is likely to win in the end. What is remarkable is how long Mesrine had managed to outwit them.

It was characteristic of Mesrine that he effectively chose the manner of his death. It would have been relatively easy for him to lie low in one of the large towns of the South, or to have

bought anonymity abroad. But instead, each month he hit the headlines with some spectacular crime or publicity stunt. It was not simply *folie de grandeur*, a mad belief that he was too brilliant to be caught. In an interview with a journalist some months before his death, he said, 'I know that it will end badly; tomorrow, next week, next month, in eight months if I'm lucky.' He even let it be known that he carried revolvers and grenades with him wherever he went, so that if the police ever caught up with him he could fight back. Rather death than another spell in prison: 'They will never take me alive,' he said.

This impression – that he deliberately chose to be killed – is reinforced by a tape-recording that was found in his flat by the police. Against the sound of romantic music (a typical piece of stage-management) Mesrine declaimed: 'My love, it is certain that if you are listening to this I am dead . . . I prefer to die from the bullets of the police than waste away in some cellar . . . They are going to make a hero of me. It is not me who fabricates this hero. There are no heroes in crime. But I am richer than any of them. I have the soul and the courage that they lack.' When questioned about it in hospital, Sylvie said that she knew nothing about the tape's existence. It had probably been made a few days before Mesrine's death.

2

On 10 June 1940 the streets of Paris were calm. The weather was warm and sunny after the coldest winter anyone could remember. On the boulevards the chestnut trees were in full leaf. The cafés were busy although rationing was severe. There were already three meatless days a week.

People stood on the sidewalks watching as government clerks filled trucks with piles of books and papers. The government was preparing to abandon the city. A sombre voice on the radio told Parisians that 'If the Germans should reach Paris, we will defend every stone, every clod of earth, every lamp-post, every building. We would rather our city was flattened than allow it to fall into the hands of the Germans.'

The enemy were approaching Pontoise, fifteen miles north-west of the outskirts of Paris. Hastily printed posters appeared on walls, fences and doors: *Citoyens! Aux Armes!* The implica-

tions of the poster did little to reassure people – the idea of fighting in the street was inspiration to few; the great exodus from the city began. The railway stations were swamped with people jostling and struggling to keep their places on the platforms, waiting for trains that hadn't arrived and – if they did – probably wouldn't leave.

In a small but comfortable flat in Clichy, just north of Paris, Jacques Mesrine, three and a half years old, sat quietly on his bed. His elder sister was tying his shoe-laces for him, as their mother finished packing essential clothing in three small suitcases. Before locking the last case she carefully placed her rosary beads and a framed photograph of her husband on top of her children's clothes. All three were uncomfortably hot; they were each wearing several layers of clothes so they would have less to carry.

There was a knock at the door. Monique Mesrine picked up the suitcases and shepherded the children out of the flat, sadly pulling the door shut behind her. She didn't know what was going to happen in the city, but she felt that she couldn't risk her children's safety, especially with her husband away at the front. She had decided to take them south to her home village. An elderly friend who came from the same area had also decided to leave Paris and had offered to take the Mesrine family in his car.

The roads out of Paris were already blocked with refugees, on foot, on bicycles and in cars and vans. Each vehicle bore the international badge of flight, a mattress roped to the roof as a makeshift protection against aerial bombardment. By nightfall there were an estimated eight million people on the road, most of them without food, water or the shelter of a car. Few knew where they were going. The Mesrines were better off than many. Monique had made the decision to leave Paris two days earlier and had arranged supplies for the journey for her family and the friend with whom they were travelling. Others had to take their chance: enterprising farmers raised money by selling bottles of water at two francs a time to the desperate, hungry, and often ill refugees. Inevitably, children lost their parents in the crowds. The body of a two-year-old girl lay on the tarmac, squashed like a rat. A village priest was seen trundling a very old lady along in a wheelbarrow. Progress along the crowded roads was slow; journeys that should have taken less than a day took two or three,

even by car. Occasionally German planes would be heard overhead, and thousands of people would scuttle into the ditches or hide behind trees or cars to avoid the strafing machine-gun fire. Some, almost insensible from hunger, fear and exhaustion, did not seem to have the energy to attempt to save themselves from the guns. An old woman just stood and watched the planes shooting at her, stoically, hardly seeming to mind whether she survived or was killed. Among the crowds were Dutch and Belgian refugees, coming into France at the rate of 5000 a day. Hundreds of them were already wounded, many had lost limbs, or were blinded or hideously disfigured, but they staggered on relentlessly, along the straight roads between the fields of ripening grain, towards an uncertain destination where they hoped they would be safe.

Incongruous among the columns of battered refugees moving slowly through the night were dark limousines carrying the French Cabinet towards Tours. Few of the politicians had any more idea of what they were going to than the pedestrians, who were refusing to make way for vehicles on the road. Paul Reynaud, the Prime Minister, and Charles de Gaulle travelled in the same car. De Gaulle was the youngest general in the Army (he was fifty) and had been appointed Under-Secretary for Defence the week before. The Countess de Portes, the Prime Minister's mistress, followed in the next car: she was reputed to be the most powerful woman in France. It was she who, while the evacuation of the government from Paris was being considered, had been at Reynaud's desk, in charge of a meeting of government officials.

As the refugees streamed away from Paris, the German Army headed for the city. Along the Seine and the Marne the panzer divisions raced, invincible predators assaulting France. De Gaulle and Reynaud agonized over the situation, talking all through the night. Monique Mesrine wrapped her overcoat round her daughter, and gently rocked her son to sleep, softly humming half-forgotten tunes.

These were nightmare days for France. Rumours flourished – one moment people heard that America had joined the war and was landing troops in Normandy, the next that the Germans were massacring everyone in Paris.

The child Jacques Mesrine was at first delighted to arrive at Château-Merle, a village near Poitiers, and be greeted by a

noisy crowd of affectionate cousins of all ages. But the cheerfulness of the family reunion was blighted by the news that Reynaud had resigned as Prime Minister, and that the new government, headed by the 84-year-old Marshal Pétain, was surrendering to the Germans. The great hero of the battle of Verdun was going to betray France. A fortnight ago France had felt strong and confident of ultimate victory. Now she had capitulated completely. There seemed to be no one left in France to represent the aspirations and pride of the people in their struggle against Germany. It is not surprising that the first few days in the country seemed strange and disconcerting to the young Mesrine. The pleasures and preoccupations of a child, carefully attended to in peacetime, were of little significance now. His mother and cousins were worried; they talked endlessly among themselves in low voices. For the first time in his life, Jacques Mesrine was not the centre of attention. No one knew what the Armistice would mean. Would German troops occupy all of France, or would they now withdraw? What of the French soldiers behind German lines? For Monique Mesrine the crucial question was whether it was now safe for her to return to Paris to work, or whether she should stay at Château-Merle.

On 21 June 1940 Hitler stage-managed the most humiliating moment of shame for the French. In revenge for their own defeat in 1918 the Germans had brought out of a museum the very railway-carriage in which Marshal Foch had dictated French peace-terms, and set it up on its original site in the Forest of Compiègne. Hitler and Goering and the German High Command were there, bemedalled and contemptuous, to greet the French delegation. The Germans were to occupy all of France north of Tours, as well as a broad belt down the Atlantic coast – over half the country in all – and strategically the most important section; the French Air Force and Fleet were to disarm; all German citizens in France were to be handed back (their names would be supplied by the Gestapo if necessary). So much for Pétain's 'peace with honour'. On 1 July, the new government, regarded by most of its subjects as traitorous, established itself at Vichy in the Free Zone.

So the early childhood of Jacques Mesrine, which had hitherto been unchallenged and happy, became disrupted. He had been saddened the year before when his father had left home to join the army, but the comfort of his home and the continuing warmth and affection of his doting mother and sister had softened

the blow. Now everything had changed; for Jacques life would never again be easy, pleasant and uncomplicated.

Soon Monique Mesrine returned to Paris to work, leaving her children behind at Château-Merle. They were lucky to be there: it was a glorious part of the country; there was more food than in Paris, and they had relations to look after them. But Jacques missed his mother, and his father, and became increasingly lonely. He did not know what was happening, but he did know that his mother had left and that his relations in this strange place were themselves frightened. His sister, who at home had played with him for hours at a time and had taken care of him, was now more interested in establishing her own security by making friends with local girls. His was a fate experienced by children all over Europe, but it was no less painful for that.

Jacques Mesrine is remembered in the area as a pretty child, aware of his charm and usually able to get what he wanted from adults by smiling at them. He is also remembered as unusually solitary and seems to have found it difficult to make friends with other children. On one occasion he was invited to go and play with some little boys on a neighbouring farm, but said that he would rather not go. His relations were surprised, and asked him whether it was because the boys were unpleasant or rough. 'No,' he said, 'but I always have a nicer time on my own.' However, he did apparently enjoy talking to adults and would often hang around the kitchen for so long while the women were working that, in despair, they would force him outdoors. His great friend on the farm was a dog, with whom he would go for long walks, talking aloud to it.

Three formative years passed. Jacques continued to spend much time alone or with the animals on the farm. But he gradually began to make friends among the local children. He still maintained his distance, while enjoying playing war-games with them, using bits of old wood as guns. He was bored by school and frequently stayed away, finding both the other pupils and the lessons slow and unimaginative. He had an exceptional memory, and once amazed an old villager who overheard him singing all the words of every verse of a popular song.

Mesrine grew up surrounded by women, old men and children. He was intrigued by the German soldiers he saw marching noisily, wearing smart uniforms. Years later he remembered the day German troops marched into his cousins' farm, de-

manding food. He knew by now that his father had been taken prisoner by the Germans, and he went up to an officer and asked him when the Germans would free his father. He sat on the soldier's knee while the German showed him photographs of his wife and children. As soon as his cousin saw this she shouted: 'Get down from there at once! And you, leave that child alone!'

Jacques was also fascinated by the men who came into the house late at night, to be joyfully welcomed by the women. These men, his male cousins and their friends, who didn't wear uniforms, were given the best food and plenty to drink, and information about what was going on in the area. He quickly learnt that he must not tell anyone about these candle-lit visits, he mustn't even discuss them during the day-time with other members of the family. The nights when the members of the Resistance came were intensely frustrating for the small boy. He enjoyed the party atmosphere, especially the presence of men. But on these occasions no one was interested in him. If he tried to interrupt the adults' conversation he would be told to be quiet, to 'listen to cousin Hubert', or be sent to bed. Despite the frustration at being ignored, he found the excitement of these visits intoxicating. One member of the family would always sit outside, keeping watch. Everyone else would be constantly on the alert for the sound of footsteps, or a truck in the distance which might mean that someone was approaching the farm. The women wore their dressing-gowns so as not to arouse suspicion by being fully dressed should anyone arrive, and the men were never out of reach of their guns. There were hiding-places arranged in the house and farmyard in case the Germans should arrive during the night, but Jacques was already aware that these brave and attractive figures, always laughing and joking when he saw them, would be killed if they were discovered.

The principle on which the Vichy government operated was subservience. This was understandable. The Germans were occupying most of the country and could easily have seized the remaining part. But the French authorities surpassed themselves in the art of anticipating the wishes of their conquerors. Before the Germans had even asked for it to be done, they started rounding up French Jews to be sent to concentration camps. De Gaulle, the leader of the Free French, was sentenced to death in his absence; French troops were sent to fight the Allies in the Middle East. It was a government that was vilified by half its subjects for being traitorous and cowardly. Under it, Mesrine

passed three important years. The heroes of the time were not politicians, establishment figures or soldiers, but outlaws, men of violence who fought in the Resistance, sleeping in barns, under hedges, in attics, emerging at night to kill. It is not surprising that they stimulated his imagination.

In June 1944 the Allies had landed in Normandy and the tide of the war turned against Germany. The occupying forces had to pull out of France. The Resistance was jubilant, and planned ambushes all over the country to speed the enemy on their way. As one convoy of German jeeps and lorries was leaving Poitiers, they were fired on, but the convoy drove on hardly bothering to fire back. One jeep turned into the nearest farm, where, by chance, Jacques and one of his cousins in the Resistance were lying in a hayloft, talking. It was a warm day and they had come to visit some relations. A number of German soldiers jumped out of the jeep, and ran through the farm, shooting everyone they could find in revenge for the Resistance ambush. From the loft Jacques and his cousin watched the massacre. All his life Mesrine was to be haunted by the memory of the blood of an eighty-year-old woman trickling over the cobblestones. For an hour after the Germans seemed to have gone, they stayed silently in the barn, then cautiously climbed down the ladder and went out into the farmyard. The sun and the blood were beginning to set. Jacques was seven.

It wasn't until after the Germans had left that he saw most of the members of the Resistance by daylight. They looked dirty and tired. They arrived by car this time, at the farm where Mesrine was living. Women with shaved heads were standing among them, being jeered at and insulted. The men were laughing at them, throwing things at them, tipping wine over them. They tore one woman's dress off, raped her, and beat her unconscious with a rifle-butt. Jacques had never seen a naked woman before, nor had he known that people who usually seemed good and kind could be so brutal. A few days before he had found a man dead in a ditch near the farm, face down. Scores were being settled, the people who had felt aggrieved and outraged for so long were exacting revenge. Hatred was evident everywhere and Mesrine said years later that for him the Liberation of France surpassed in horror the Occupation.

Soon Monique Mesrine arrived to take her children home to Paris. Back in the city Jacques's life became more disciplined.

He found himself deprived of the company of the dog he had loved so much, and of the country pastimes he had enjoyed – walks through the fields in the evening, collecting unusual feathers and used cartridge-cases. He was now sent to a church primary school, Saint Vincent de Paul in Clichy, where his work was found to be rather behind that of other children of his age. He seemed eager to learn and to be well-behaved, although he was to say later that he had done no work and had often played truant. He was delighted, overwhelmed with pleasure, when he returned from school one day to find that his father had come home. He was ill and thin and looked worn-out, but for Jacques it was enough that he was there. Not that Pierre Mesrine had a great deal of time to spend with his son. He was an ambitious man and was determined to make a success of the textile-designing business he had started before the war. It was difficult to get staff, difficult to get credit, difficult to export or import. He loved his wife and children, but it was not easy for him to see very much of them. Not only did he work every evening, but he found the noise of the children oppressive. The prison-camp had seriously undermined his health, and it was to be over a year before he was fully fit again. Jacques was later to complain that he had longed for companionship, discipline and interest from his father, and had found only a rather remote affection.

Jacques seems to have inherited some of his father's ambition, even if he lacked the diligence which enabled Pierre to make a success of his business. An elderly lady, a friend of the family, met him when he was about ten years old. She found him appealing and began to ask him what he was going to do when he grew up. It was a spring day, and they were in his grandmother's garden. 'Would you like to be a doctor,' the old lady asked, 'or a lawyer, or' – coyly – 'perhaps a priest?' He leapt to his feet, very red in the face, looking furious, and said: 'I don't want to do any of that. It's all useless. I've got to be famous,' and ran indoors looking as if he were about to cry. The adults felt embarrassed, briefly, and changed the subject. It was a moment that Monique Mesrine was to have cause never to forget.

The family were beginning to prosper. Pierre bought a car, and disappointed his son by failing his driving-test, while his wife passed first time. He bought an old farm-house in Normandy, and the whole family worked at the week-ends to renovate it. Jacques learned to fish, and, borrowing a rifle from a neighbour, he learned to shoot. He continued to enjoy his own

company, and to spend a lot of time alone. He would go for long walks or bicycle rides, and spend hours watching birds or animals. He practised shooting the tops off bottles, or the lower branches off trees, and surprised himself with his own skill. Years later he claimed that at this time he accidentally shot a blue tit, lining it up in the sight of his rifle and unintentionally pulling the trigger. Suddenly its song stopped and the bird fell to the ground, covered with blood. Jacques was horrified and overcome with shame; he loved animals and liked to think that they trusted him. He had just learnt that he could kill, and the discovery did not make him any happier. He said later that this was the only murder he had ever committed that he had regretted.

When Jacques was twelve his parents decided to send him to the Oratory School at Juilly, near Meaux, about thirty miles from Paris. He was still an erratic student, usually doing badly, but occasionally surprising his teachers by excelling in a particular subject for a week or two. In adolescence he seems to have become more gregarious; from now on we hear constantly of Mesrine in a group or a gang, no longer the solitary child wandering around alone, but a confident figure vying with other boys for the admiration and approval of his peers. At the Oratory School Jacques was taught the catechism, but learned also how to smoke, how to argue, and the art of climbing up and down the outside of buildings at night. A limited education, but invaluable in later life.

A man who was at school with Mesrine remembers that he was always spoiling for a fight, either physical or verbal. He did not, however, seem to be a particularly violent or sadistic person; he apparently needed to assess his strength, to know how he compared with the others. He also used to crave verbal, intellectual contests. At this he did not excel – he was badly-read, and would often enthusiastically propound a theory he had thought of on the spur of the moment, passionately defending it although he had obviously not considered its implications. One day, Mesrine and some other boys were sitting in a café, against school rules, smoking and drinking beer. Mesrine was talking a lot. Thirty years later one of his companions said that Mesrine agreed that all anybody could want was wealth and power. Morality was the cowardice of the mediocre, who have to obtain their ends by subterfuge because they are too frightened to fight directly for them. He went on to say, with pompous confidence, that there was no God; but if there were, He would not care whether

someone became rich by virtuously running a factory and grinding the faces of the poor in the dust, or by robbery or conquest. Mesrine apparently believed that it was ironic that their parents paid lip-service to 'the great' Napoleon; but if he were alive then, they would have said how evil he was, because he would have terrified them out of their wits. The other boys were hardly listening at the end of his speech.

Suddenly a scene at another table attracted their attention. A boy from their school, crippled and overweight, was sitting in a corner of the café. Another pupil, older and a known bully, went up to him and started taunting him, demanding that he should hand over all the cash he had on him. Mesrine went to help the crippled boy, and got rid of the bully for him. He also got himself a nosebleed. His friends were entertained by such a display of chivalrous behaviour in one who had just been decrying conventional morality – to the anger of the young hero, who stormed out of the café – and didn't return to school that afternoon.

Many of the boys at the school were the sons of politicians or government officials, and many of the pupils themselves harboured political ambitions. One, who is now a senior civil servant, remembers Mesrine scornfully and passionately deriding his ambitions. 'So you want to be Prime Minister and spend your time making pompous speeches to fat-assed provincials explaining how many thousand Chinese you're killing each week in order to win the next election? And all the time you have to let the Cabinet Ministers fuck your wife so that they allow you to remain Prime Minister, so that you can make more pompous speeches to fat-assed provincials, and choose new Ministers to be cuckolded by. Nowadays politics is just a matter of ass-licking, and the man with the biggest tongue and the fewest ideals wins. How does our government differ from that of Vichy? All that's changed are the front men, behind them it's still the same hypocrisy, fraud and cowardice.'

Unlike most French boys of his age Mesrine was upset by the continuing war in Indo-China, which had been dragging on since 1945, and was heard to say that it seemed to him wrong that France was fighting these people to prevent them ruling themselves. It was an attitude which did not endear him to any of his schoolfellows, neither the well-behaved, hard-working ones who liked the idea of the great French Army fighting to defend the great French Empire, nor the lazy, rebellious vandals who liked the idea of anyone fighting.

Jacques's schoolwork deteriorated steadily. Once a month the pupils were allowed to go home, but he almost always had his visit home cancelled as a punishment for having failed some test. He was becoming known in the school as a troublemaker, and as a ringleader among the bad boys. It was with a certain relief in the summer of 1951, when Mesrine was fourteen, that the Oratory Fathers decided to overcome their habitual love for all men, including the misguided, and get rid of him. Pierre Mesrine was shocked by his son's expulsion from this distinguished school, and decided to send him to school in Paris, so that he could keep an eye on him, and make sure that he was working.

On the first day of the autumn term Jacques turned up at the Lycée Chaptal. It was one of the few occasions when he did so. He continued not to do any work, and away from the discipline of the priests it became easier. His father was pleased to notice that Jacques was taking a greater pride in his appearance, and attributed it to his desire to 'reform'. In fact, the reason that Jacques now took regular baths, had his hair well cut and meticulously hung his clothes up and pressed his trousers each night, was that he had discovered girls. He also discovered the cinema at this time, which was to remain an abiding passion.

Every morning he left home early, clutching a few books, and went into a nearby café, where the understanding owner would keep the books for him until the evening. It was at the suggestion of the café-owner that after six months he started to change the books he always carried. After a couple of cups of coffee, and a look at a newspaper, he would wander off, to see a film, or a girl, or perhaps to play tennis. It was a gentlemanly life for a truant from school. The necessary income for such a life came mainly from his mother's purse, although his father's overcoat pockets would often yield some loose change, or occasionally the odd note. He also sometimes got money for 'new' text-books, or a fictitious school outing. Mesrine was making new friends, other truants, the idle young rich and the idle young poor. One evening he stole some cash from his mother to pay for a visit to a prostitute with some friends. His parents had gone to a concert given by Edith Piaf, the street-walker's daughter who had risen to international stardom. The Mesrines would have been shocked if they had known where their son was that evening.

It was inevitable that Mesrine should again be expelled. He was sixteen, and unqualified. His grandmother, whom he had always adored, was asked by her son and daughter-in-law to talk

to Jacques, to see what he wanted to do, whether he had any feasible plans for the future. His parents were sure that he would not explain to them any ideas or ambitions he might have. But it was no use: he would not even talk to his grandmother. There were a great many things he refused to do, but very few of the options open to him that he would even consider. In desperation Pierre enrolled his son at a technical school for a course in electronics. 'That was the worst of all,' Mesrine said afterwards. 'At least at school they talked about some quite interesting people in history lessons, and in geography they talked about different places. In the electronics course there was nothing I could be bothered with.'

This attempt to prepare him for an honest trade lasted less than two years. Once again, he was asked to leave. The Director of the school said that he felt Mesrine had wasted his time since enrolling. Unfortunately, this was not entirely true. He had spent it with other miscreant teenagers and petty criminals, stealing cars for joy-rides or tearing off into the night on motor-bikes. He was intoxicated by speed and danger. It seems certain that if his student life had lasted a little longer, he would have been in trouble with the police sooner. As it was, a job seemed the easiest way to get a regular income, so he got himself a series of jobs and was sacked from each in turn. He worked in a shop, in a factory, in an architect's office.

His parents' treatment of him at this time was ambivalent. On the one hand they were desperate that he should work, and hold down a job, and so they tried to monitor his activities to make sure that he left the house on time each day. On the other hand they were anxious not to interfere in his life so much that they might alienate him completely and force him to leave home. They saw very little of him – every evening he would either go out or would entertain friends in his own room. He no longer went with them to the farmhouse in Normandy. His mother would tentatively ask about where he was going or what he had been doing when she handed him his freshly-ironed shirts, but he would be evasive, or pretend not to hear her. Mesrine was at this stage (he was by now seventeen) deeply dissatisfied with his life. He loathed the menial jobs he was doing, hated having to tell girls who asked what he did for a living that he worked in a shop, or was a clerk in an office. He knew, however, that there was no point in discussing his future with his family, because all they could say was that he was not qualified to do

anything which carried interest or status. And he was unwilling to air his humiliation by initiating such a discussion.

He moved away from home when he married. Leaving home was one of his motives in proposing marriage to Lydia. The other was a momentary desire to be a knight in shining armour. She was a beautiful black girl from Martinique, who was already a month pregnant when he met her. He liked the way that she saw him at a dance at the campus, walked up to him and said, 'Will you buy me a drink?' He liked her brothers, who were cheerful and amiable and welcomed him as a friend. And he liked sleeping with her. Pierre and Monique Mesrine were pleased that in this respect at least their son appeared to be doing his duty – they were led to believe that he had known Lydia for rather longer than was actually the case. They liked Lydia, and thought that the responsibilities of marriage would be good for Jacques.

The newly-married couple found a tiny flat. Their relations were generous, and they found themselves surrounded by new possessions – saucepans, radios, towels, lamps. For a few months they enjoyed playing house. Jacques liked cooking and was delighted to have a kitchen of his own. They were so happy at first that for much of the time Mesrine didn't bother to get up and go to work, and Lydia gave up working for her degree in chemistry. In the evenings they would go out and eat in a café in the Latin Quarter of Paris, getting rather drunk and sometimes rounding the evening off with a quarrel. Jacques began to feel that he had made a mistake in marrying her. She was bad-tempered and jealous and expected him to earn money to keep her. He was cross that she had given up her university course, and would therefore be unable to earn much money herself. When the baby was born they decided that Monique had better bring it up. She was delighted. She still had no idea that Jacques was not the father. It was a handsome child, and she had looked forward to being a grandmother. She and Lydia discussed in front of Jacques how like him the child was. For him, things were going from bad to worse. He found that he bitterly resented this other man's child. He began to see other women, often staying out all night. In the morning he would reappear, sleepy and unshaven, and begin the day with a row with his wife. He was not yet twenty.

3

In the autumn of 1956 Jacques Mesrine received his call-up papers. Conscription came as something of a relief for him. He hoped that it would cut him free from the squalid entanglement his marriage had become. Safe in a barracks it would be easier to arrange the divorce he longed for, without the daily quarrels that would result if he were still living at home.

Military life held positive attractions for him. The idea of discipline did not seem so objectionable after the series of menial jobs which he had tried. Perhaps he thought that the demands and unpleasantness of army life might alleviate his dissatisfaction with himself, and help to quell the self-hatred which his inability to devise an exciting and successful life for himself had created. And beyond that there was the possibility of distinguishing himself in action, of rising through the ranks to a position of power. There would also be guns.

To his horror Mesrine discovered that the government expected him to spend his military service in an office, a small cog in the massive bureaucracy of the army. Clerical work! It was no better than what he had escaped from in civilian life. Frustration led to insolence, which in turn led to increasingly frequent spells in the 'cooler'. Finally, anxious once again to get away from the pattern of his life, he asked to be sent to Algeria, an option rarely sought by conscripts.

For three years the army had been attempting to put down the Muslim insurrection, and there were by now half a million French soldiers in Algeria. For the army, if not the French people, the outcome of the fighting had come to seem crucial. Professional soldiers felt that the government had betrayed them badly over Indo-China. Over 90,000 French fighting men had died, over 100,000 had been wounded, but the government granted Indo-China its independence. In the same year, 1954, there had been considerable debate at home about whether France should join the proposed European Defence Community, which would mean, in practice, the formation of a single European Army. The National Assembly had finally voted against the scheme, in August 1954, but the army had been angered by the support that the scheme had received from politicians of all parties, and from sections of the press. The public no longer seemed to consider that the pride and prestige

of France depended on her army, and among writers and intellectuals there was a strong, and growing, anti-militaristic feeling. The Suez fiasco in November 1956 only made matters worse. Again the army felt that they had been let down by the weakness of the government. They were angry with the politicians who had allowed themselves to be browbeaten by the Americans and with the British for abandoning the venture on the second day of the invasion of Egypt. The ignominy was almost as bad as defeat in battle. By 1957, when Jacques Mesrine landed on Algerian soil to join them, the army were fighting mad.

The company to which Mesrine found himself attached was involved in transporting supplies from one place to another. There was little actual danger, except when guerrillas ambushed convoys of lorries, but it was better than being in France. It was further away from Lydia, and the ever-present possibility of danger excited Jacques. Even so, it was hardly the life that he had originally, happily, imagined for himself in the army. He was delighted when his Company Commander decided to create two combat units, and he immediately volunteered to serve in one of them.

Life as a 'proper' soldier suited Mesrine much better. His immense strength stood him in good stead for the tougher life of a combatant. He gained notoriety by slipping illicitly out of the barracks one evening after a twenty-mile forced march, spending the night in a brothel, and reappearing on the parade ground at dawn the next morning, wide-awake, correctly dressed and ready for another day's rigorous exercises. Mesrine was rapidly becoming more confident of himself. He was exceptionally fit and strong, and imposed his will on his colleagues. He began to notice that he had abilities the others lacked: he was more daring, had more presence of mind and was more willing to stand up against his superior officers.

The task of the French Army in Algeria was almost impossible. Most of the Arab population, although not active in the war, was nevertheless sympathetic to the F.L.N. (Front de Libération Nationale), the nationalist movement. Terrorist tactics were being applied to European civilians in the towns; plastic-bomb attacks on French shops and restaurants became more frequent; understandably the morale of the soldiers, especially conscripts, was low. They felt that they were just sitting around, waiting to be fired at. The frustrations and self-restraint which this form of warfare imposed on an army of

occupation were considerable. As a result Mesrine, like many Frenchmen serving there, nurtured a hatred for the Algerians. The A.L.N., the military wing of the F.L.N., seemed able to kill or maim the French, civilians and soldiers, and then disappear, merging in with the Arab population, leaving no one for the army to fight against. Tales of army brutality against Moslems became more frequent. The Arabs murdered the soldiers; in return the soldiers tortured and killed people they suspected of having any connection with the F.L.N., or sometimes people they didn't even suspect. It was a world beyond morals or compassion, one in which brutality, strength and arrogance ruled.

The army were beginning to behave as if they were answerable to no one but themselves. In the autumn of 1956, outraged to learn that the government was planning to negotiate with the rebels, the army hijacked the plane carrying the F.L.N. leaders to Paris for the peace talks, and imprisoned the passengers. The government were unable to do anything about it. By the beginning of 1958 it was generally known the F.L.N. were making considerable use of bases over the border in Tunisia; later in January they launched a successful ambush, in which sixteen soldiers were killed, and four taken prisoner. In the preceding six months French aircraft had been fired on dozens of times from the Tunisian side of the border. Eleven of them had been hit, and two brought down. On 7 February 1958 the French Army announced that any more attacks of this kind would lead to swift reprisals. On the following morning another French plane was attacked from Tunisia. In retaliation, the army attacked the Tunisian village of Sakhiet. Twenty children and forty-nine adults were killed; 130 people were wounded. The government was perhaps a bunch of lily-livered diplomats, but the army was determined to prove that it was not. The French government offered compensation to the bereaved and the wounded, and the Tunisians rushed journalists and Red Cross officials to the site to inspect the bodies.

When Jacques Mesrine arrived in Algeria he had been loking for adventure; he had little political interest in the outcome of the war. Now, two years later, he had developed not only a hatred for the Arabs but also a considerable respect and admiration for the army. It was during his military service that, for the first time, he found sympathetic older men with whom he could identify. He had come to understand the schizophrenia

with which the army had to live. The supreme and unalterable duty of a national army, it had always been believed, was to support the legal government. Yet the heroes were now men like de Gaulle who had openly rebelled in 1940. Unquestioning obedience was no longer a prerequisite of a heroic army officer. Feeling themselves abandoned and betrayed by the civilian government, it was understandable that a number of senior officers should attempt to justify an independent political role for the army.

Mesrine found himself increasingly sympathetic to the militant right wing of the army, and the army, or his superior officers, looked increasingly favourably on him. He was proving, for the first time in his life, that he was a success. It was a situation in which to hesitate before killing was to be killed, in which acts of atrocity lost any meaning through their frequency. Violence, death and pain were part of an elaborate game, in which those who lost, lost everything, and those who won, gained nothing. In this amoral world Mesrine realized that he was capable of killing without conscience or a backward glance.

Mesrine's experience was hardly unique, but his self-awareness caused him to record the change in his attitude to life and death more fully and more conscientiously than did other men. He recognized his own enjoyment of the situations in which he found himself: planning ambushes, killing on the basis of suspicion alone, risking his life for the sake of a few moments of excitement. A man might as well be kind as cruel, it hardly mattered. Many times in later years Mesrine told the story of an occasion when a small Arab boy came up to him and asked him where he was taking his father, who, with another man, was being detained for questioning although there was no evidence that he was a rebel. Mesrine was for an instant reminded of another war, other soldiers, another child asking a German officer in a farmyard to give him back his father. Defying the sergeant to stop him, Mesrine freed the Arabs. The following day life returned to the normal round of killing and looting.

It was suggested to Mesrine by his commanding officer that he might make a career in the army. He rejected the idea, claiming that he disliked the discipline. It seems more likely that his motive was a desire to find another theatre for the talents he knew he possessed. He sympathized with the professional soldiers in their anger that they had lost, or been deprived of, so much of their status; but it had hardly made life in the army

more attractive. During the time that Mesrine had been in Algeria his divorce had been completed, and Lydia's child had gone to live with its grandparents in Martinique. He had been awarded the Military Cross for Valour, the Commemorative Medal for Operations for the Maintenance of Order, and a certificate for good conduct. He had never told his parents that he was actually engaged in the fighting, as if, like an anxious child looking for approval, he wanted to surprise them with extraordinary feats that they would read about in the newspapers.

Demobilization for Jacques meant a moment of pleasure when he showed his father his medals. His father had even arranged a job for him as a travelling salesman for a lace-manufacturer. Inevitably he found it difficult to settle back into civilian life: in the army his considerable physical energy had been stretched, and, excited by the danger, he had excelled. Now he was bored, bored by the idea of his job as much as by his day-to-day routine . . . He was hurt that his father had not taken him into his own business. Jacques had returned to live with his parents, and this contributed to the feeling of constriction that oppressed him. He had stolen a .45 automatic from a dead terrorist, and in the privacy of his room he would take it out, clean it, polish it and stroke it. He disliked his job, resented his father's lack of faith in him. He already knew how dangerous relationships could be, and was sure that he would never again allow himself to become so involved with a woman. The gun, his secret illicit possession, guaranteed his status as a man in his own eyes. The world might think he had a dreary job and was still living with his parents, but he knew that he possessed a lethal weapon, and he knew how to use it.

Girl-friends came and went. Mesrine's pay came in, and went out on gambling, wine and food. He was becoming increasingly depressed by his future, too like the downtrodden people he saw in the Métro and in little street-corner restaurants, ordering the *plat du jour* and a small glass of *vin rouge ordinaire*. He dreaded the idea of struggling to make ends meet, gazing wistfully into travel agents' windows. As his discontent grew worse, so did the quarrels he had with his mother. Finally he walked out, penniless, with just a few clothes and his gun. He went to stay with friends, contacts he had made while playing truant from school. They were in the main unemployed, or in dead-end jobs. He also began to see some of the men he had known in the army. Both of these groups of friends were on the fringes of crime.

Mesrine was no longer a travelling salesman in lace; he was now selling vacuum cleaners. It was, however, not surprising that he would be attracted to the money he saw being made from crime, as well as to the risks and danger. On a part-time basis at first, Mesrine entered his new profession. The style that was later to be talked about all over the country was already evident as Mesrine took his first faltering criminal steps. By his own admission, on his first job, a simple case of breaking and entering a flat, he insisted on carrying an enormous bunch of flowers. He claimed that it was because if he was found in the block of flats, it would be assumed that he was delivering them. He undoubtedly also enjoyed the fact that no one could fail to notice him ostentatiously carrying the flowers, and if he succeeded in burgling the flat, it would be an even greater triumph. The darkness and anonymity sought by the average petty crook did not interest him; he enjoyed the challenge of making himself flamboyant and knowing that by appearing totally confident his true intentions would not be suspected.

So Jacques Mesrine abandoned the world of commerce and began to engage in another form of free enterprise. It seemed to pay off; he was managing to live quite comfortably, relishing the image of himself as a high-living Al Capone.

One night, at about ten o'clock, accompanied by two of his friends, Mesrine managed to make his way into a flat in the rue d'Isly. The flat belonged to a wealthy financier, and what interested the burglars were two safes, one much larger than the other. Having checked the flat for alarms, and turned on a transistor radio to drown the noise, the safe-breaker settled down to work. Twenty minutes passed slowly. Suddenly, disaster! The drill broke. Without it there was no way that they could get into the safe. Mesrine was not man to be defeated by chance. Telling one of his colleagues to remain in the flat, he left the flat with the other, saying that he would be back soon. Ten minutes later he parked his car in the boulevard Ornano. Mesrine's accomplice watched in horror as he smashed the glass in the door of an ironmonger's shop, let himself in, and collected three drills. '*Flics!*' the man gasped, as a routine police patrol cruised slowly past. Breathless, and with his heart hammering as if it would break open his chest, Mesrine watched the car drive along, infinitely slowly it seemed to him, until at last it was out of sight. The accomplice was even more shaken than himself, and they returned to the scene of their attempted crime.

It was by now too late to go on working on the safe, as the neighbours would have been likely to complain about the noise, so they settled down to sleep in the drawing-room. The next morning they were woken up early by the noise from the kitchen of a nearby restaurant and they promptly started work. It was relatively uncomplicated to complete the breaking of the smaller safe in the flat. When it was opened, it contained wads of bank notes, platinum bullion, bearer bonds and a bunch of keys. As the others packed the contents of the safe into bags, Mesrine tried the keys in the lock of the larger safe. His delight at the ease with which he had opened it disappeared as he discovered that it contained not money, but a pile of negotiable bonds. It was disappointing, but he took the bonds anyway, knowing that he would be able to get something for them, even if it were far less than they were worth. Together the three of them had taken about twenty-five million francs – which wasn't bad for a few hours' work.

In 1960, eighteen months after de Gaulle had been recalled from his exile at Colombey-les-deux-Églises to become the first President of the new Fifth Republic, relations between the army and the government began to worsen. The army, who took some of the credit for bringing down the Fourth Republic, were by no means unreservedly in favour of de Gaulle, but they had felt certain that his passionate patriotism would ensure that he backed them in their struggle to keep Algeria French. On his first visit there after assuming power the General seemed a little lukewarm in his support of the soldiers and settlers, but he did at least pronounce publicly their slogan, '*Algérie Française*'. But by January 1960 it was evident that he wanted to find a political solution to the problem; there did not seem to be the expected commitment to the idea that Algeria was a part of France and must remain such at any cost. European extremists rioted in the streets of Algiers, killing fourteen policemen, and occupying buildings in the city. This episode became known as 'The Week of the Barricades'.

The army, sent to suppress the rebellion, gave food to the extremists. Momentarily it seemed as if the city was in revolt against Paris, but the rebel settlers surrendered to troops loyal to the government. General de Gaulle had been lucky to win the round. As the months passed, the President attempted an iron-fisted conciliation with the army, refusing to be brow-beaten by them, but visiting army camps in Algeria and announc-

ing that the F.L.N. would have to be beaten before the country's future could be decided. However, by the autumn he had expressed his support for at least a limited degree of autonomy in Algeria.

There were those in the army who felt that he had committed treason. No one felt it more strongly than the retired General Salan, who had served in Algeria until de Gaulle had recalled him in 1958. Salan took the provocative step of returning to live in Algeria, knowing that the return of an ex-Commander-in-Chief could provide a focus and leadership for the *Algérie Française* movement. He was recalled to Paris and forbidden to return to Algeria, but he slipped over the border into Spain, and took up residence in a hotel in Madrid. In January 1961 the results of a referendum in Algeria and in Metropolitan France authorized de Gaulle to go ahead with his plans to provide limited autonomy for Algeria. In Madrid, where other extremist leaders, both military and civilian, had joined Salan, the news did not entirely surprise them, and the O.A.S., which they had been planning, was born. The initials stood for *Organisation Armée Secrète.* By April they were a familiar daubing on Algerian walls.

On 21 April a new revolt broke out in Algiers, the most dramatic yet. It was organized by four retired generals, including Salan, and although it failed within four days, there had been a moment when it had looked as if the army might attempt to seize power in France. The Prime Minister appealed to people living near aerodromes to go and discuss the situation rationally with paratroopers who might land. De Gaulle appealed for support on television, on the lines – familiar to every Frenchman – of Louis XIV's famous dictum, 'L'État c'est moi.' The public seemed to agree with him and even the trade-unions took the threat of a right-wing coup seriously enough to support the President.

Despite the failure of the revolt, the crisis which it had provoked made it clear to anyone who might be in doubt that the O.A.S. was a force to be reckoned with. In Algeria acts of terrorism in the name of the O.A.S. multiplied, and an extraordinary custom developed whereby the *pieds noirs* (black feet), the European Algerians, would at dusk beat loudly on casseroles and saucepans the rhythm of '*Al-gé-rie Fran-çaise*', three quick beats followed by two slow ones. The haunting noise echoed through the French residential sections of Algiers, usually followed by the dull thudding of plastic-bomb explosions.

It was during the second half of 1961 that the O.A.S. began seriously recruiting hit-men and gun-runners from among the French criminal fraternity. Jacques Mesrine was by now twenty-four. He continued to make a comfortable living from crime, although his responsibilities had increased. He was supporting Soledad Ortiz, his new mistress, a black-haired, dark-eyed Spanish girl he had met on holiday on the Costa Brava the year before, and their new baby, Sabrina. He had not yet asked Soledad to marry him, and their happiness was marred by quarrels over Jacques's criminal activities: she saw clearly that unless Jacques got himself a job he was bound to end up in prison, or be badly injured during a robbery. She tried gentle persuasion, violent screaming, emotional blackmail, but none had any effect – Jacques's attitude was that she had to accept him as he was or leave him. She stayed.

An officer in Algeria had once asked Mesrine whether he might be 'interested in getting involved in something a bit different, something quite dangerous perhaps?' Towards the end of 1961 a stranger visited Mesrine and reminded him of the conversation. Mesrine's answer was the same as it had been when the question was first put to him – he *could* be interested, it would depend what they were up to. It is clear that the idea of hiring mercenaries and professional smugglers to aid the extremist cause predated the formation of the O.A.S. by some years.

The exact nature of Mesrine's involvement with the O.A.S. is difficult to determine. It has been alleged that he returned to Algeria during 1961 or early 1962, in order to carry out work for the O.A.S., probably with the notorious Delta Commandos headed by Roger Degueldre, a tough, single-minded fanatic who had risen from the ranks of the Foreign Legion to take charge of O.A.S. 'action', which involved murder, torture, arson and other terrorist activities. It is probable that the O.A.S. tried to persuade Mesrine to cross the Mediterranean; they had in their ranks ruffians, deserters and downtrodden Algerian whites, all ready to do whatever was required. But an intelligent, trained ex-soldier, known to be exceptionally brave, was more use to them than half a dozen willing amateurs. And Mesrine had excellent 'references', he had already proved himself on the very soil over which the O.A.S. was fighting. It is possible that his role was restricted to gun-running and acts of terrorism inside France, and that he was also involved in extortion, one of the O.A.S.'s fund-raising specialities, demanding money with

menaces from wealthy citizens, often those who were known to have right-wing sympathies. The O.A.S. damaged its public image considerably by attempting to extort money from Brigitte Bardot. Furious, she handed their letter over to the police, and was given a special guard on her flat in the Avenue Paul Doumer. No acts of violence were attempted against her, but for a while the French in Algeria boycotted her films.

There is a persistent but unsubstantiated rumour in criminal and ex-O.A.S. circles in France that it was Mesrine who, during the autumn of 1961, was responsible for hoisting an O.A.S. flag on to one of the towers of the cathedral of Notre-Dame at dead of night. The police were outraged the next morning to see it blowing in the breeze, a mere 200 yards from their windows in the Préfecture, the Police Headquarters.

Mesrine's involvement with the O.A.S. marked a turning-point in his career. The progression from uncontrollable teenage truant to petty hoodlum was predictable. His connection with the rebellious army officers who became professional terrorists taught him a range of illegal skills which were to be invaluable to him in his later life. He learnt the techniques of gun-smuggling, became familiar with the ways in which a single gun or even a small arsenal can be hidden in a car, safe from any search short of a complete dismantling of the vehicle. He discovered much about the ways in which fire-arms can be adapted for specialized work, or how they can easily be hidden about one's person; there were many refinements available to the professional or the connoisseur that as an ordinary soldier he would never have learnt about. The O.A.S. network embraced some of the best forgers in Europe – there was almost no identity card or official document that could not be reproduced if it were needed. And if there should be some difficulty about copying it, the network had its methods of getting hold of genuine papers and documents: it had connections and agents in sensitive positions and high places. The success of Mesrine's later career was to depend to a considerable extent upon his access to the craftsmen of crime.

The most important element in the legacy of Mesrine's O.A.S. career was possibly the attitude that the Organization instilled in him. From the beginning, the O.A.S. was bedevilled by double agents and informers. It is known to have been successfully infiltrated, and more than once there were critical leaks of information to the S.D.E.C.E., the *Service de Documentation et de Contre-Espionnage*, the French Intelligence

organization, through their undercover agents in Algeria, known by the derisory title of *barbouzes*, or 'false beards'. The leaders of the O.A.S. were constantly aware of the need for stringent security measures to surround all of their activities, and Mesrine never forgot this early training. Criminal fraternities tend to be full of gossip, speculation, titbits of information picked up at several removes from their source. It's understandable – everyone likes to talk shop, and by the nature of their calling criminals have more spare time than those engaged in more bourgeois professions. From the O.A.S. Mesrine learnt never to tell anyone anything that they did not have to know. He was not, as is sometimes suggested, averse to working with other criminals, but he was careful not to allow any one individual to know the whole truth about his activities, or even about his acquaintances. It was the wayward senior members of the French Army who taught Mesrine to beware of telephones. They taught him to assume, always, as a matter of course, that every telephone was tapped. They taught him to avoid, it possible, giving his real name over the phone – it was safer to have a code name, and for different poeple there should be different code names, so that if, for example, the police should discover that to one acquaintance he was known as 'Édouard', they would not know that to someone else he was 'Gilles'. Mesrine followed this advice, although on several different occasions he used the name Bruno, both as a code name and when he was actually living under a false identity. The O.A.S. taught him never to make arrangements over the phone if it could be avoided, or to have prearranged code names for cafés or bars where he might want to plan a rendezvous. They taught him to use code words to convey to whomever he was talking that something had gone wrong, or that the police were on to him.

In addition to his professionalism, perhaps the most significant effect of the O.A.S. on Mesrine was on his attitude to lawbreakers and to officers of the law. The fanatics who ran the Organization saw themselves as fearless, righteous patriots, the last hope of the French nation against the traitorous de Gaulle and the mediocrity that seemed to them to be threatening to engulf the national life. They were proud to be outlaws. And they were scornful of, even though they were ultimately outwitted by, the police, to whom they felt themselves superior in intelligence and often in social background. They saw the police as the hirelings of the government, while they, the O.A.S. were fighting

for the good of the motherland. This arrogance towards the law and those attempting to enforce it was to be one of the most significant characteristics of Jacques Mesrine's criminal career. Even when he was engaged in purely 'commercial' crime, with no ideological motive, he was to retain this contempt for the average policeman. It was not dislike, he did not hate all police in the manner of a good many villains, but he did fel aen instinctive superiority towards them which encouraged him to believe that he would always outwit them.

Christmas 1961. Jacques was happy. He and Soledad had recently married and he was completely devoted to his six-month-old daughter. From the Organization, and from his 'freelance' activities, he was earning very well, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that he was a highly esteemed employee of an elitist organization. Three days after Christmas he celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday. The outlook for the New Year was good.

4

As it happened Mesrine was in jail by March; he was to spend the next year and a half there.

His first conviction was for a relatively minor crime, much less ambitious than some he had committed. He had burgled the house of M. Robert Grussenbucher, a rich engineer, at Beaumont-le-Roger, not far from his parents' Normandy farmhouse. He had stolen a camera, jewellery, a fur coat and some paintings, worth altogether about 18,000 francs. Six weeks later he was stopped while carrying arms in his father's car, which had been identified at the scene of the robbery. It was through a combination of carelessness and bad luck that he found himself in prison – it was foolish to have driven his father's car, rather than a stolen one, and it was unfortunate that the police stopped him while he was on his way to rob a bank with guns in his car. He was sentenced to eighteen months for the Grussenbucher robbery and another eighteen months for transporting fire-arms, and transferred from Evreux, where he had been arrested, to Orleans jail. With remission he only served eighteen months in all.

Once again Jacques Mesrine's parents did their best to help

him. They instructed a leading lawyer to act on his behalf, and they took in Soledad and Sabrina to live with them. With Soledad, and sometimes Sabrina, they visited him as often as they were allowed to. His behaviour towards them was unpredictable. He could be charming, humorous, obviously delighted to see them; but at other times he would be hostile, irritable and rude. The monotony of prison life, with insufficient work or physical excercise, could hardly be expected to 'reform' Jacques. Boredom and the indignity of spending most of every day sitting in a cell doing nothing offended his sense of the respect due to him or to any other man. He was genuinely shocked by the filth and overcrowding in the prisons, and by the way the convicts were treated. He seems to have seen himself as someone persecuted, a martyr, rather than simply as a petty criminal who had been caught. Monique pleaded with her son to 'go straight', but he refused to commit himself to life on the right side of the law.

In July 1963 Jacques was released on parole from Orleans jail. His parents and wife were waiting for him, as he emerged pale and underweight into the morning sunshine.

It seems that by this time Jacques had in fact decided to go straight. His father had bought him a flat in Paris, and he found himself a job in an architect's studio. He even enrolled in a course which would lead to a diploma in architecture. Fortune, and his family, were being very kind to him.

Soledad was delighted that at last her husband had a respectable job. He showed a flair for architecture. His work in the studio consisted of making scale models of proposed buildings and called for mathematical ability as well as practical skills. He was studying hard in the evenings, achieving excellent results in his diploma course. Although he kept in touch with his old friends in the O.A.S. and in the underworld, he does appear for over a year to have 'stayed clean'. He claimed later that he had never felt, when he was an architect, that he was being himself: he was playing a part, acting a role, convincing his boss and the people with whom he worked that he was just one of them, a man working hard to support his family, while enjoying and hugging to himself the secret knowledge of his ruthlessness, his amorality. He had been exceptionally lucky to be given a flat and a good job. It was a chance to build an honest life that most ex-convicts never have. But far from reintegrating Jacques into normal society, it emphasized to him how different from other men he really was. In the meantime, however, Jacques continued with

his job and his studies, both of which he apparently enjoyed. His ex-accomplices and O.A.S. masters did not put undue pressure on him to return to 'work'.

In the autumn of 1964, just over a year after he had taken him on, Jacques's employer was forced to make him redundant. It was no reflection on his work, the firm was in financial trouble and it was inevitable that the most recently hired employees should be the first to go. Mesrine tried at first to find another job, but not very hard. He felt aggrieved that this was the reward destiny was offering him for having worked seriously.

By Christmas Mesrine had three mouths to feed – his son Jacques had been born at the end of November. By the middle of January he was gainfully employed dealing in and smuggling counterfeit money between Switzerland and France, and robbing the occasional bank or shop.

His relationship with Soledad suffered from his return to crime. She was deeply upset, and certain that he would be arrested again, leaving her to fend alone in a foreign country for herself and her children. As far as Mesrine was concerned, domestic quarrels seemed to be the only drawback – he earned much more money from crime than in the architectural studio, and rapidly rediscovered the intoxicating excitement of danger.

One spring morning Mesrine walked into a jeweller's shop. Smiling shyly at the jeweller he explained that his grandmother was about to be eighty and that he had been asked by the family to buy her something on their behalf. Did the jeweller, Mesrine asked, have something very special in stock, perhaps something with diamonds? The jeweller beamed delightedly, fetched Mesrine a chair and scuttled off to his safe. Mesrine sat down, folded his hands meekly in his lap, and remarked to the female shop-assistant how pleasant it must be to work in such a refined atmosphere, among all these lovely things. He looked admiringly round the shop and blew his nose. Casually he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, withdrew a revolver, stood up and demanded that the girl lead him to the safe. His embarrassment and gaucheness seemed to have abandoned him. The safe was in the basement of the shop, and the girl obediently lead him to it. It was open. Mesrine pushed the jeweller out of the way with the muzzle of his revolver, and emptied the contents of the safe into his brief-case. With the jeweller and his assistant walking ahead of him, at gunpoint, Mesrine made his way with them back upstairs. As they were about to enter the shop Mesrine was

appalled to hear the siren of a police car in the road in front of the shop. The wife of the jeweller had been coming downstairs from their flat above the shop at the exact moment when Mesrine had been menacing the shop-assistant. She realized what was going on, and had immediately gone back upstairs and called the police. Mesrine immediately turned round and ran out through the back door, which he had passed on the way to the safe. He found himself in a small yard with a single high wooden gate leading out of it. He undid the latch on the gate, pushed it open to suggest that he had fled through it and then lifted the lid off a dustbin, climbed in and crouched down, balancing the lid on top of his head. He was still clutching the brief-case. The police swarmed through the shop, into the yard and out through the gate. They swarmed around the area for a couple of hours, and reluctantly had to acknowledge that the bastard had got away. It was a miraculous escape, and a very stiff Mesrine who, in the middle of the afternoon, tentatively lifted the dustbin lid a few inches, looked around to see whether it was all clear. He hobbled uncomfortably home.

Mesrine himself boasted of another lucky escape from the police. He used to carry the tools of his criminal trade in a black attaché case, together with a white overall, a pair of scissors, a hairdresser's comb, and an envelope containing trimmings of hair. One day he was rifling through a flat, having kicked the door in as usual, when he heard a police car. He rushed to the window from which he could see a woman pointing up in his direction, and police rushing into the building.

He could not go down the stairs – he would have walked straight into the arms of the police. So he had to go up. He chose the service stairs in preference to the main staircase, and on the top floor he found a lavatory with a window that he could squeeze through. He managed to climb up on to the roof, and made his way across the roofs of several buildings until he found a skylight window over what looked like a maid's bedroom. Mesrine broke the glass and lowered himself into the room. He quickly put on the white overall, slipped the scissors and comb into the breast pocket, and emptied the envelope of hair trimmings over his shoulders. He pushed the attaché case under the bed, opened the door, and then strolled downstairs, casually smoking a cigarette. Out in the road everyone was staring up at the flat he had been burgling. Mesrine did likewise, walked up to the policemen who were manning a strict cordon round the

block, questioning everyone who wanted to leave. With complete innocence he asked them whether there was a fire in the building. He told them he was a hairdresser, and had to get back to his shop, because his clients would be waiting for him. The police waved him through, their eyes on the building where they supposed the criminal would be.

Algeria had become independent on 3 July 1962. The battle to keep the tricolour flying over Algiers had been finally and irrevocably lost. Degueldre was executed by firing squad on 6 July. He was singing the *Marseillaise* as the shots rang out. An officer stepped forward to deliver the coup de grâce, and according to an eye-witness shot him not in the temple but in the shoulder, so that the former leader of the O.A.S. commandos continued to die slowly. Salan meanwhile had been locked up in Tulle prison, writing his memoirs. The leaders of the movement were either in prison or had fled, to other European countries of South America.

But the habit of treason is not easily broken. The O.A.S. network survived. The exiled leaders and hundreds of the ex-soldiers, civil servants, criminals and others who had been part of the movement remained in touch. They had fought together and although they had lost the war, they had survived. More quietly, even more secretly than before, the organization lived on. Believed by many to be dead, it was lying low, waiting for the moment when it might be able to act. The moment was never to come; followers were to drop away, dispirited by the failure of the initial aim, and the movement rapidly became outdated by events. Nevertheless, it appears that on several occasions during the next few years Jacques Mesrine was hired by his former paymasters to carry out dirty work for them. They were still collecting information, about individual members of the government and about affairs of state, although it is not entirely clear to what use they intended to put such information, or whether they did in fact use it.

On 2 December 1965 Mesrine was arrested inside the house of the Governor of Palma in Mallorca. He had been hired to enter the house and steal a particular document, the exact location of which he had been given. He always claimed that he did not know for whom he was working, that he was approached by an intermediary who paid him and gave him detailed information about the security precautions in the Governor's residence. He later recounted with amusement how the Guardia Civile as-

sumed that he must be an agent of the French Government, and the more he protested that he was just a thief, the more convinced they became that he was in the pay of his country. He was flown to Madrid to be interviewed by the French Ambassador, who also believed that he must be employed by one of the government departments. He was treated with extraordinary leniency, given a six-month suspended sentence, and allowed to return to Paris. It seems probable that he was working for a splinter group of the O.A.S., or an extremist organization into which ex-O.A.S. members had found their way, although it has never become clear exactly what the document was that he was looking for.

It was January 1966 and Jacques was twenty-nine. His marriage was becoming increasingly unhappy. Soledad was again angry about Jacques's criminal activities, and made little attempt to hide her dislike of most of his friends; he found it very difficult to tolerate criticism from his women. He doted on Sabrina, who was by now four and a half years old, but he seems never to have felt the same interest in his sons (the younger son was born in April 1966).

During the summer of 1966 Jacques left Soledad, just walking out of the flat one day and flying to Rome. He wanted his mother to look after Sabrina, but appeared unconcerned about the boys, who continued living with their mother. Later they too were brought up by Monique when Soledad returned to Spain.

He was free again. He went on holiday, touring Italy. Back in France he worked, carrying out robberies and continuing to accept assignments from the O.A.S. leaders. He agreed to attempt to steal a top-secret document from a government office. It was a theft that a less resourceful criminal would have said was impossible. Several attempts had been made already to get hold of it by bribing and corrupting civil servants, but all attempts proved fruitless. Jacques liked the idea of the large amount of money he would earn if he were successful. He also liked the idea of a challenge. Several schemes were put forward for the theft. Mesrine was assured that if needed he would be provided with dynamite or other explosives. There would be no problem about extra money for accomplices. Guns and cars – whatever he needed – would be provided. It was acknowledged as an exceptionally difficult mission and Mesrine was to be given

every assistance in carrying it out. He thanked his employers for their solicitude, but replied that he only wanted the agreed sum in used bank notes. They admired his professionalism when he told them that he thought it better that they shouldn't know how he intended to carry out the theft. It was 12 o'clock as the meeting finished; Jacques declined their offer of lunch, saying he had some work to do.

Just three hours later, Mesrine parked his motorbike in the road outside a government office. He walked up to the main doors, greeted the security guards, held aloft two buff foolscap envelopes, saying simply, 'from the Minister', and walked purposefully past the guards into the building. Once inside, he did not know where the office was where the document would be. So he took off his cap, and wandered down the corridor. He knocked at an unmarked door, opened it and peered round. A secretary was sitting at her typewriter, reading a magazine. Guiltily she slipped it under a pile of papers and, in answer to Mesrine's question, told him that the room he was looking for was on the first-floor, and gave him the number. He found the room without any trouble, tapped on the door and when there was no reply he tried the door handle. He was staggered to find that the door was not locked. He crossed to a filing-cabinet and pulled open a heavy drawer. He had reason to be grateful for the efficiency of the French bureaucratic machine – the document which could earn him so much money was exactly where it should have been. He slipped it into his top pocket and gently shut the drawer. At the same moment the door opened partially, and Mesrine could see through it, straight ahead of him, a figure in an expensive suit, listening to the end of a joke which his companion in the corridor was telling. The civil servant laughed, told his companion that he had enjoyed his lunch, and entered his office. He was surprised to see a young man screwing a light bulb into his desk-lamp, switch it on, and smile broadly at him, saying: 'There now, Sir, that's better.' Mesrine strolled out, leaving the civil servant to his afternoon's work.

The O.A.S. conspirators were amazed when Mesrine handed them the document four hours after they had asked him for it. He admitted that he had not intended to carry out the theft that afternoon. He had gone to the building to carry out some preliminary reconnaissance, but when he found that the office was unlocked he had seen no reason not to steal it then. It is not known whether the civil servant ever wondered why the

'electrician' had decided to replace his light bulb, or why he was not carrying any tools, or even the old bulb!

In the spring of 1967 Jacques's parents tried once again to persuade their son to go straight. It was obvious that he did not have a regular job, but they were aware that he had a lot of money. They knew that Soledad had tried hard to keep him on the straight and narrow, and that it was largely his refusal to curtail his criminal activities, and her refusal to tolerate those activities, that had led to the breakdown of their marriage.

Jacques refused to go back to the flat he had shared with Soledad and the children, the flat his father had bought for him when he came out of prison. Pierre regretted buying the flat to some extent, because he thought that living in Paris had provided Jacques with constant temptation – nightclubs, his criminal friends, the cost of high life and the risks of low life. The Mesrines wondered whether their son might like to manage a country inn: he was an excellent cook, he was charming and he had spent enough of his life in hotels and restaurants to know what their clients wanted. This suggestion of a new career was tentatively put to Jacques and, to the delight of his family, he responded with enthusiasm to the idea.

So Pierre Mesrine bought for his son the tenancy of the Auberge du Mont Saint-Mard at Vieux-Moulin, a village of about 500 inhabitants, on the edge of the forest of Compiègne, fifty miles north-west of Paris. The inn was a large stone building, oozing a marketable old-world charm through every oak-beamed ceiling. It was tastefully furnished, with the solid antique furniture of rural France. Most of the customers were local, with the occasional couple from Paris coming for the week-end, but it seemed to the proprietors, Monsieur and Madame Tisserand, and to Pierre Mesrine and his son, that there was scope for expansion.

The Tisserands were delighted with their new tenant. He redecorated the building with flair, making it more comfortable but at the same time enhancing its rustic charm. He hired an excellent new chef, and made it clear to all of his suppliers that he was interested in only the finest quality food: if the vegetables were not absolutely fresh, if he had doubts about the age of the meat, he would sent it back and threaten never to deal again with tradesmen who could not guarantee the excellence of what they were selling. The reputation of the inn improved and it began to attract customers from all over the country. But as the inn began

to flourish, Mesrine found time lying heavily on his hands. He had hired first-rate staff who knew how to do their jobs, and he was not needed there every day. He began to spend more time in Paris in nightclubs, bars and restaurants, with his old friends.

One evening he strolled into a bar in the Place Blanche, in the Pigalle, where he met Jeanne Schneider, a prostitute, known to her friends as Janou. Within a few hours they were to become lovers and Jacques was ever afterwards to consider her the most important woman in his life. She was tall and dark-haired, quite handsome but often described as rather coarse-featured. To Mesrine she was the most wonderful woman in the world, preferable to the glamorous Lydia or the lovely and tempestuous Soledad, or any of the many women he had known. She was, in the best tradition of her profession, warm-hearted, and she gave Mesrine what no other woman, however beautiful or virtuous, had ever offered – total, uncritical admiration. She became a frequent visitor to the inn, and to the flat that Mesrine now rented in Paris.

Mesrine continued to plan improvements for the inn, but increasingly his plans were not put into practice. He still ran it efficiently, however. He refused admission to uncouth locals and noisy teenagers, and quietly and efficiently got rid of anyone who had drunk too much. He later boasted that a thug whom he had thrown out of the inn and who had then complained to the police that Mesrine had assaulted him was found hanged. Without specifically claiming responsibility Mesrine managed to imply a sinister connection between the man's rash behaviour in reporting him to the police and his sudden death. But most of his customers had no reason to complain of the way Mesrine treated them! They found him a highly entertaining raconteur, even though his stories were not always entirely credible. He sometimes told an extraordinary tale about a holiday he claimed to have spent in Spain, in his youth, with a very wealthy older woman. They had been walking together down a steep, narrow street, he said, when an army jeep drove past them. The older woman had tried to step out of the way of the jeep, but had tripped and fallen. The jeep ran into her, and sliced her head off. The head then bounced down the hilly street in front of Mesrine's eyes, only stopping when it rolled up to the wall of a butcher's shop. The anecdote was, needless to say, never substantiated by the police. When he was not regaling the guests with gory stories there was other entertainment for them. Mesrine per-

formed the most astonishing card-tricks, his hands moving swiftly and confidently as he hoodwinked his audience.

Mesrine was planning to buy the building next door to the inn to turn into a casino. He was at this time gambling heavily himself, sitting up into the early hours of the morning playing poker. He also often took Jeanne in his Oldsmobile to the races, putting huge sums of money on outsiders. He sometimes made money at cards, but almost never on the horses. With increasing frequency he would shut the inn for a day or two. The time soon came when it was open only at week-ends.

Mme Tisserand, the owner of the inn, arrived unexpectedly one afternoon and found Mesrine and three of his friends sitting in the dining-room, surrounded by dozens of empty champagne bottles, and a thick cloud of cigarette smoke. They were playing strip-poker, and as Mme Tisserand walked in Mesrine threw one of the players' trousers over his shoulders into the log fire.

It was decided that it might be best if Mesrine were to terminate his tenancy. He left behind debts of 80,000 francs, and a photograph of himself, laughing.

Jacques Mesrine and Jeanne Schneider went to live for a while in the Mesrines' farm-house with their four dogs. Sabrina came to stay with them, and so did several of Jacques's friends. Jacques was discontented. He had enjoyed running the inn, and was disappointed that he had had to leave. Apart from anything else it was useful to have a legitimate occupation, to distract the police from his criminal activities, and explain how he managed to make a living. Despite the considerable improvements Mesrine had made at the inn, he had been the tenant for only eight months in all. He now felt that he needed a break and set off with Jeanne for a winter holiday. On the afternoon of 12 November 1967 they arrived in Chamonix at the Hôtel de la Croix Blanche.

They had reserved a double-room for ten days. Jacques gave his name as Jean-Jacques Moreau, born 12/03/1934, Company Director, living at 17, rue Duphot, Paris 1. Mesrine was not planning to commit any crimes, but as a result of his O.A.S. training he always, instinctively, gave a false name. Two days later Mesrine and Jeanne were giving a dinner in the hotel dining-room when they saw a new guest arriving at the reception desk. He looked very wealthy. Mesrine thought he was probably an Arab prince in western clothing. He asked the waiter serving them who the man was, and was told that he was Albert Setruk, a regular visitor to the hotel. Setruk was said, boasted the waiter,

to carry thirty million francs in his brief-case. As the waiter innocently repeated this piece of staff gossip, Mesrine's eyes met Jeanne's, and they both looked long and hard at M. Setruk, who was chatting to the hotel receptionist, with his brief-case on the floor by his feet. Setruk, a Tunisian by birth was a large man, more than six feet tall, and he had with him an aide, André Flery. Mesrine learnt from the hotel staff that he usually went down to the casino late in the evening.

Soon after midnight Mesrine and Jeanne went down to the reception desk. At about 2 a.m. Setruk and Flery returned from the casino. The usual night receptionist wasn't there; instead there was a tall, dark-haired girl whom Setruk didn't remember having seen there before. It was an awkward moment, but she seemed very friendly, and explained to the guests that the keys to their rooms were already in the doors. She then escorted them up to the first floor in the lift. Jacques was just finishing his search of Setruk's room. The brief-case was there, but it was empty, and Mesrine had been unable to find any money. In the corridor he met Jeanne and the two men coming towards him. He searched Flery and Setruk at gunpoint, stole their cash and papers, and took them downstairs where he tied them together, leaving them on the floor behind the reception desk, beside the receptionist who had been tied up earlier. He cut the hotel's telephone-wires before leaving, putting his suitcases into the boot of their car, and calling goodbye cheerfully to the three men bound and gagged on the floor. He had got only about 7000 francs from Setruk, a cheque-book and some photographs and papers that had been in his wallet.

It was the first time Mesrine and Jeanne had carried out a crime together, and Jacques was delighted with the way she had performed. Not only had she kept her wits and acted coolly, but had shown, in the treatment of Setruk and Flery as they were being bound and searched, that she was not averse to violence, threatening them with her gun, and laughing as Mesrine punched Setruk on the chin. Mesrine told Flery that he had nothing against him, but he taunted the Tunisian, saying how much he despised Arabs. Two weeks later he sent anonymous threatening letters to Setruk, on 30 November and 4 December, to his home address, warning him that unless he paid 50,000 francs he would be killed. Mesrine included with the letters photographs and documents that he had found in Setruk's wallet. The police were called in, and they kept watch on Setruk's house. This

seems to have scared Mesrine from taking any further action. It was not until five years later, when Mesrine was on the run from the Canadian police, and his photographs were published all over France, that he was identified as the man who had robbed Setruk at Chamonix.

During 1967 Mesrine seems to have become considerably more violent. This may have been a result of the encouragement he received from Jeanne, or possibly it was because he felt that after being sacked from the inn he was irretrievably committed to a life of crime. On 8 December he went to a dressmaker, Mme Coudercy, in the rue de Seze in Paris, to buy some clothes for Jeanne. He paid for the clothes with a cheque of M. Setruk's. The next day he returned, with a male accomplice and with Jeanne, dressed as a man. They were all armed, and they bound and gagged Mme Coudercy, her daughter and son-in-law, and then proceeded to taunt and jeer at them. Mesrine took jewels and other objects worth altogether twelve million francs, and spent most of the night in the shop, drinking, laughing with his accomplices, and boasting to the three trussed-up figures on the floor about other crimes he had committed. He even enjoyed terrifying Mme Coudercy and her daughter by playing with a flick-knife a few inches away from their faces. The brutality was shocking, and the stupidity of staying at the dressmaker's for hours after he had successfully robbed it was astonishing. It was uncharacteristic of him to enjoy wanton violence, although he would not flinch from using violence if it facilitated the carrying out of a crime. It seems probable that he was drunk, and that he knew that the violence would entertain Jeanne. She herself had a criminal record, and had lived with hardened criminals. She belonged to the Paris nightclub underworld of petty crime and prostitution where a man's value depended not on his goodness, his charm, his intelligence or his style, but on his ruthlessness. Mesrine's small-time criminal friends, and the intelligent and idealistic men he had met in the O.A.S. were a long way from the ugly, lurid world of commercial vice from which Jeanne came.

Jacques Mesrine was now wanted for several crimes, and felt that it might be sensible to leave the country for a while. He and Jeanne took a holiday in Spain and Italy, and then decided to try their luck farther afield. He was thirty when he crossed the Atlantic for the first time in 1968. Although on the run, he was going to Montreal on a scheduled flight.

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On 7 March 1969 M. Georges Deslauriers hired a chauffeur/chef and a housekeeper. He had had several replies to his classified advertisement in a Montreal newspaper, and had chosen a French couple, Jacques Mesrine and Jeanne Schneider. M. Deslauriers, a greengrocery and textile millionaire, was delighted with his new staff. The man was a first-rate chef. He was charming and seemed reliable. The woman worked hard and was humorous and friendly. They were given the small lodge at the entrance to M. Deslauriers's estate to live in. The estate was at Saint-Hilaire, on the outskirts of Montreal, and since Georges Deslauriers spent only the week-ends at Saint-Hilaire, Mesrine and Jeanne Schneider had it to themselves during the week. As Deslauriers was crippled and could walk only on crutches, he was dependent on his staff to make life comfortable for him, and Jacques was invaluable: not only did he always produce marvellous food, but he entertained the guests with card-tricks and amusing stories. He was almost treated as a friend by Deslauriers and would often play poker and blackjack with the millionaire and his friends.

Mesrine and Jeanne had been very lucky. When they arrived in Montreal they found themselves a luxurious flat on Sherbrooke Street East, in the middle of the fashionable shopping area of the city. Mesrine was refused a work permit because of his criminal record, but he managed to find himself a job on a building-site. Jeanne went to work in a geriatric hospital as a nursing auxiliary. However, the cold Canadian winter set in, and building work was abandoned until the spring. 'Jeanne and Jacques' then found themselves jobs as nanny and chauffeur to a wealthy family. Although they enjoyed the work they had little time to themselves, so they applied for the position with M. Deslauriers.

They had a few criminal contacts in Canada, and during these first few months they made new underworld friends, but they do not appear to have been directly involved in any illegal activity. It is possible that Mesrine intended to go straight in Canada, but it seems more likely that he was establishing himself, getting to know the country and making contacts before turning his talents to crime. In the meantime the Deslauriers job was

ideal. The estate was magnificent and included a stretch of the Richelieu river. They explored parts of Canada during their plentiful time off, and were astonished by the beauty of the country, the forests, lakes and mountains. They found the Canadians friendly, relaxed and outgoing.

This comfortable existence did not last long. M. Deslauriers's gardener did not like Jeanne and one day a violent row broke out, after which the gardener went to M. Deslauriers and said that either they had to leave or he would. The gardener had been working for M. Deslauriers for many years, and reluctantly the millionaire chose to dismiss the French couple. Mesrine was furious – he was reminded of the occasion several years before when he had been sacked from the job at the architect's studio for no reason except that he was the most recent employee. On both occasions Mesrine had been going straight. He began to feel that he would never be given the chance to live in peace like other men. He had little choice but to return to crime. His sense of outrage at being sacked seems to have been genuine, even if his intention of going straight wasn't: he had already told some of his criminal friends that he would be ready to help them if they had anything in mind. He could not forget that he was not like most other criminals: he was the indulged boy from the expensive college at Juilly, the friend of the intelligent and disciplined OAS leaders. He could not accept that it was as difficult for him to re-enter the normal world as for any Parisian thug. His pride was affronted. He would have his revenge.

Jeanne and Mesrine returned to Montreal, to a flat near their first one in Sherbrooke Street East. Mesrine carefully contacted some of his friends and began to devise a plan of action. He decided to kidnap Deslauriers in such a way that it would suggest that the millionaire had arranged a fake kidnapping with ransom in order to reduce his tax liabilities. Michel Dupont, a young French friend of Mesrine's, agreed to help him and Jeanne was also eager to be involved. The three kidnappers planned to leave Canada for Venezuela as soon as they received the ransom money.

A few days after the sacking, Mesrine and his two accomplices returned to Saint-Hilaire. They knew that Deslauriers would be alone in the house after midnight.

As they drew near to the estate they switched off the engine of the car. Jeanne steered while Dupont and Mesrine pushed the car up to the house. A few yards from the house Jeanne put on

the handbrake, climbed out and gently shut the car door. The house was completely still and everything was going according to plan. Jeanne climbed in through a window, unlocked the front door and let the two men in.

In silence they crept round the house, making sure that no one else was there.

Jacques slipped into the millionaire's bedroom, and switched on the light.

Deslauriers was horrified to see his former chauffeur standing at the foot of his bed with a knife in his hand, and Jeanne armed with a revolver. It didn't take the kidnappers long to persuade their victim to write a letter to his brother Marcel, who was also his business partner, asking for the ransom. The letter started: 'I will be killed unless I can find 200,000 dollars. Borrow it if necessary. The bank notes must not be of the same series. You must swear not to alert the police . . .' They also made Deslauriers write a note saying that he had been suddenly called away on business. Mesrine fixed this note on to the front door to explain Deslauriers's absence if anyone called.

Marcel was to deliver the ransom money to a man who would approach him in Sherbrooke Street Métro station. Mesrine and Jeanne drove Deslauriers back to their apartment in his own Cadillac, while Dupont drove the car in which they had travelled to Saint-Hilaire. It was 5.30 a.m. when Deslauriers was bundled upstairs into Mesrine's flat, where he was to be kept until the ransom money had been received from Marcel. Jacques poured his prisoner a large gin, made him undress and took away his crutches. At about 7.30 that morning Mesrine delivered the ransom note to the Deslauriers' company office. He then parked the millionaire's Cadillac, in a car-park in the rue de la Montagne near the went end of Sherbrooke Street. He took a taxi for the fifteen-minute drive back to the flat where Michel Dupont and Jeanne Schneider were guarding the hostage. He placed the car-park ticket into Deslauriers's wallet and put it back into the millionaire's jacket pocket. He had reasoned that if he was arrested he might be able to 'prove' that Deslauriers had himself parked the Cadillac, and had made his own way to Mesrine's flat, and that the plan was set up by the millionaire himself.

The rendezvous with Marcel Deslauriers was fixed for 5 o'clock, and Jacques and Michel were there on time. Marcel did not arrive. Jeanne joined the two men thirty minutes later at a prearranged spot, having given the captive a drugged drink.

The kidnappers had planned to leave Montreal as soon as they had the ransom, but they now had to alter their plans. They returned to the flat, intending to contact Marcel Deslauriers with details of a new deadline for him to hand over the money. They were aghast to discover Georges Deslauriers had escaped. Mesrine realized that the 'drug' he had bought must have been fake. Deslauriers had managed to crawl around the flat until he found his clothes and his crutches. All they had got out of the attempted kidnap was 500 dollars that they had taken from his wallet – hardly enough to cover their expenses!

They could not stay on in Montreal, so they took a train to Percé, a port on the Gaspé peninsula at the mouth of the St Lawrence river, about 500 miles north-west of Montreal. If necessary, they thought, they would be able to get a boat back to Europe. The train journey was uncomfortable, and took ten hours. When they arrived at Percé they asked a taxi-driver to recommend a hotel and they were driven to the Motel des Trois Sœurs. Madame Evelyne Le Bouthillier, the owner, welcomed the three visitors and handed them the key to their bungalow.

Michel Dupont returned after a couple of days to Montreal. Jacques and Jeanne stayed at Percé, spending their time on the beach and in the town's excellent restaurants, enjoying a brief holiday in the pretty fishing-port. They became friendly with Madame Le Bouthillier, who suggested beauty-spots in the area that they might visit. They had told her that they were Belgian, in case she heard that the police were looking for a French couple in connection with the attempted kidnapping of Georges Deslauriers.

One day she invited them to have a drink with her, saying she wanted to hear all about Belgium. She was unmarried, lived alone and was pleased to have company. The evening passed pleasantly and Mesrine talked at length about life in Brussels and the Belgian people. Evelyne Le Bouthillier was charmed by his obvious admiration for her three cats.

They later discovered that Michel Dupont had foolishly gone to see his wife in Monteal and had been arrested. Deslauriers had known his name, and the police had kept watch on his house. Jacques felt sorry for him, but at the same time he was angry with Dupont for being stupid enough to go home. Mesrine hoped Dupont would not tell the police too much.

On 29 June Mesrine and Jeanne left the motel. They drove west, back towards Quebec. A few days later they slipped into

the United States, having hired a boat at Windsor, Ontario. They landed near the outskirts of Detroit. Mesrine had friends in Dallas, Texas, who would, he knew, help him either to stay in America, or to get back to France. They hired a car in Detroit and began a long drive south.

On the morning of 16 July Apollo XI took off from Cape Kennedy for the moon. A huge crowd had gathered to watch the departure, and among them were Jacques Mesrine and Jeanne Schneider. Later that night they were arrested by a U.S. border patrol and taken to Texarcana, near the Arkansas/Texas border; Michel Dupont had been forced to tell the Canadian police that they were heading for Dallas. They were kept overnight at the police station in Texarcana and transferred the following day to a prison in New Orleans.

The conditions in the jail in New Orleans appalled Mesrine, who had thought himself hardened by the eighteen months he had been inside in France. He was locked in a tiny cell with two other men. The prison was filthy and over-run with rats, mice, cockroaches and bedbugs. Most of the inmates were poor blacks, and a great many of them were kept under heavy sedation; despite this there were continual fights and brawls. Mesrine was shocked one evening to see two warders dragging the dead body of a young black boy by his feet down the corridor. He had cut his throat with a home-made knife. A trail of blood, later mopped up by another convict, went the full length of the concrete corridor.

On Wednesday 23 July Mesrine and Jeanne were escorted back to Montreal by two Canadian detectives. The Air Canada flight touched down at Dorval airport, Montreal, at 3.25 p.m. A handful of journalists were waiting with some photographers as Mesrine and Schneider emerged from the plane. Mesrine later claimed that he had been blinded by the hundreds of cameras flashing and that the airport was crowded with reporters, television cameras and policemen. The few journalists who were there were surprised by Mesrine's eagerness to talk to them, and entertained by the way he immediately lit up an enormous cigar when he saw that they were there. Mesrine enjoyed his moment of celebrity treatment even if it was not on the scale he later liked to pretend.

It is symptomatic of Mesrine's delusions of his own importance that he could imagine that his extradition from New

Orleans was the most exciting news story of the week. But it was the week Senator Edward Kennedy had driven his car off a bridge at Chappaquiddick, and failed to report for ten hours that a girl had been drowned. Also that week the whole world was in the grip of moon fever, wild with excitement over man's first landing on the moon. The arrest of 'two French-born servants', as the *Montreal Star* described them, was a relatively minor story.

The detectives who had brought them back to Canada managed to prise Mesrine away from the journalists and bundled the prisoners into a car. They were driven to the prison at Sainte-Hyacinthe, about thirty miles from Montreal. After the New Orleans prison, Sainte-Hyacinthe seemed wonderfully comfortable. It was clean and the prisoners were given a shower and a hot meal as soon as they arrived. They were then allowed to make telephone-calls to a lawyer, and to Jacques's father in Paris.

A few days later they were taken to the Sûreté in Quebec, the police headquarters of the province. They were charged with the murder of Madame Le Bouthillier, the friendly owner of the motel they had stayed in at Percé. Her body had been found, strangled, on the morning of 30 June, the morning after Jeanne and Mesrine had left the motel. The police had found labels from the motel on Michel Dupont's luggage when they arrested him in connection with the kidnapping, and he told the police that Mesrine and Jeanne were still staying there when he left them. The couple's fingerprints had been found in the motel and these checked with those the Canadian police had received from France, together with details of their criminal records.

Mesrine insisted that he knew nothing about the murder, and to the day of his death continued to proclaim his innocence over this matter, although the details of the story of his innocence varied considerably. When he was charged with the murder he claimed that the first thing he knew about it was when the Canadian police questioned him after his extradition from the U.S.A. Ten years later he said that he had found the body of Mme Bouthillier at the motel, but had left Percé without reporting it because he was already wanted for the kidnapping of Georges Deslauriers. In view of Mesrine's enjoyment of drama and his overactive imagination, it would be a mistake to assume that the second story is more likely to be true. One of the problems in attempting to uncover the truth about almost any

incident in Mesrine's life is that he seems never to have told the complete truth about anything. In general, he didn't even tell the same lie twice – he would give different accounts of the same crime to three or four of his friends, even in the space of two or three days.

Jacques and Jeanne were taken to Percé prison, to await trial for kidnapping and murder. Jacques was bitterly angry that he was accused of murdering a helpless old woman. He invented several murders that he said he had committed, and boasted of the tortures he had inflicted on people who had insulted him. Nonetheless he was worried that the public would be given the wrong impression of him if they thought that he was the sort of man who killed innocent old ladies. He also knew that he would have difficulty proving his innocence. The police could prove that he had been at the motel a few hours before Mme Le Bouthillier was killed, and Mesrine had no acceptable alibi for the time of the murder; he could say only that he had already left Percé with Jeanne Schneider. He found the idea that he should stay in prison intolerable, waiting to be tried for a crime he would not have been proud of committing. He was determined to escape.

Mesrine knew that he would soon be transferred to a larger and more secure prison, and tried. If he was to escape, it would have to be now. The Percé prison was small and at night there were only three guards. Jeanne was the only prisoner in the women's wing, and she and Jacques were allowed to meet. She agreed to the escape plan, and knew what she had to do. Mesrine managed to make himself a knife by ripping the handle off an aluminium mug, and rubbed it against the cement wall of his cell to sharpen it. It was hardly a lethal weapon, but it looked dangerous.

On 17 August the guard came into Mesrine's cell on his usual evening round. He found the prisoner reading. Suddenly Mesrine leapt to his feet and grabbed the warder. He held the makeshift weapon to the warder's throat and demanded the warder's bunch of keys. Although the warder was a hefty young ice-hockey player, Mesrine was very fit and exceptionally strong, and he had the advantage of surprise. Mesrine took the keys and locked the warder in the cell. The warder later said that Mesrine had warned him not to shout for help, or the other prison staff would be attacked.

Mesrine ran through the prison. There seemed to be no one around. Before he went to fetch Jeanne he wanted to make sure that he could open the doors leading out of the prison building. Two doors opened without any difficulty. Mesrine then found himself in front of the door into the exercise-yard. He had watched the guard opening this door a few days earlier, and had noticed the number of the key he had used. But once in the exercise-yard he still had no idea whether any of the keys he had would open the metal door leading to freedom. One by one Mesrine tried the keys in the lock. Suddenly the catch moved – Mesrine had the right key and he had opened the door.

All that remained was to go to the women's wing, and find Jeanne. She had already, according to plan, surprised her warder, locked her in a cell and was waiting for Mesrine. Before leaving the prison they raided the kitchens and filled a bag with food. As they ran across the exercise-yard and out into the car-park beyond the wall, Jeanne and Mesrine heard the prison alarm ring. It was raining and very cold although it was the middle of August. There were only two roads leading out of Percé, one northwards to Gaspé and one southwards to Chandler, and Mesrine knew that there would be police roadblocks on both of them. The fugitives, therefore, had no alternative but to make for the thickly-wooded mountains surrounding the fishing-port on three sides. From the slopes of the mountains Mesrine saw police cars flashing their lights as they drove through the town below.

The temperature was still falling and there was no clear path through the woods, but they forced themselves to keep moving. After a couple of hours Mesrine climbed a tree to see how far they had travelled; he was dismayed to see the harbour: they had been stumbling around in circles and they had only come a few miles. The soil was very wet and walking was difficult; it would also be easy for the police to follow their trail. They sat down to rest, leaning against a tree. In the morning they started again, hoping that at least by daylight it would be easier to see the direction they were moving. But it was hopeless. The local people knew the woods thoroughly, and soon after 9 a.m. Jacques and Jeanne heard dogs barking. They were only about two miles from the prison when they were recaptured, wet and bedraggled, by an armed police search-party.

The escape had failed but the relative ease with which he had

managed to leave the prison building encouraged Mesrine to try again. Never again, in fact, was he content to stay behind bars and serve out his sentence.

For attempting to escape Jeanne was immediately sentenced to six months, and Jacques to a year in prison, in addition to whatever sentences the courts might impose on them for the kidnapping and the murder.

The trial for the kidnapping was brief. Since the evidence was so strong they decided to plead guilty: Jeanne was given five years, Mesrine ten.

At the preliminary hearing of the murder trial the chief prosecutor, Anatole Caribeau, was taken ill in court. Mesrine was apparently delighted by this. Those who were in court at the time did not fail to notice Mesrine grinning as his adversary collapsed.

On 18 January 1971 the trial finally opened. Raymond Daoust, a brilliant and distinguished criminal lawyer was appearing for the defence. The judge was Paul Miquelon, notoriously severe and believed by many to have sent an innocent man, Wilbert Goffin, to the gallows fifteen years earlier. The police maintained their belief in the guilt of the accused and Mesrine and Jeanne continued to deny that they had anything to do with the killing.

The first morning of the trial was spent selecting a jury acceptable to both the prosecution and the defence. Both parties had the right to reject individual jurors. Once the jury was agreed upon the trial started.

The first week was taken up with the case for the prosecution. This rested on three major points – the first was that the fingerprints of Jeanne and Mesrine had been found at the motel, even in Madame Le Bouthillier's private rooms. Secondly, the relations of Madame Le Bouthillier had identified a number of pieces of inexpensive jewellery found in Jeanne's suitcase as the property of the old woman. Thirdly, several witnesses had been found who testified that they had seen the French couple at the motel on the evening of the murder.

Raymond Daoust expounded the case for the defence during the second week. It was straightforward. His clients did not deny that their fingerprints were at the motel – they had stayed there, and they had been invited to have a drink with Madame Le Bouthillier in her private sitting-room. They did not even deny that they had been seen at the motel on the night of the killing. But they proved that the jewels did not belong to the

murdered woman and, therefore, that her relations had been lying in order to incriminate Mesrine and Schneider. The court was shown photographs of Jeanne, taken in France five years earlier, wearing the disputed jewellery. They were shown the testimony of French jewellers that they had sold the jewels to Mesrine several years earlier. Madame Le Bouthillier's relations were asked about a watch which they claimed had belonged to her. They were asked how long she had owned it. Fifteen years, they answered. Were they certain of that? Quite certain, they replied. M. Dauost then proved to the court that the type of watch in question had been manufactured for only three years. It was a sensational moment. The chief prosecution witnesses had been completely discredited.

The jury, unanimously, found the accused not guilty. Judge Miquelon thanked the members of the jury for serving during the trial, but told them that he hoped that they would '. . . be able to sleep in peace with their conscience'. Turning towards Mesrine and Jeanne he added, 'I suggest that you pray that Madame Le Bouthillier will forgive you.'

Understandably Jeanne and Mesrine were delighted. For once, they had been proved to be innocent. Jacques immediately telephoned his father in Paris to tell him the good news. M. Mesrine had not been in good health and his son's trial for murder on the other side of the Atlantic had worried and saddened him a great deal.

Throughout the trial Mesrine had been the centre of attention. Now he had to return to prison to serve the eleven years to which he had already been sentenced. After the initial euphoria at his acquittal, this came as a terrible anti-climax. He was no longer remarkable. He was now just one amongst hundreds of convicts. Canadian prisons were on the whole cleaner and less inhuman than those in France or the U.S.A., but there remained the terrible sense of restriction, the interminable and monotonous routine common to all prisons. The only thing that enlivened their existence inside the prison was the rivalry of different factions amongst the prisoners. At the top were the big men, the gang-leaders and authors of ambitious robberies. In the middle ranks were the burglars, the forgers, and those who had been involved in serious fraud. Pickpockets, bigamists, and arsonists were considered the lowest, along with the mentally deficient whose inability to survive in the ordinary world had led them into crime. The untouchables, the complete outcasts,

were the child-molesters and the sex offenders. In this hierarchy Mesrine found himself near the top, not so much because of the crimes he had committed, but because of his strength and intelligence. It was obvious to the other inmates of the prison that he was a man to be taken seriously.

Mesrine's fury at being accused of murdering Madame Le Bouthillier had not disappeared when he was found guilty. Now that the trial was over, he had plenty of time to brood. The world had again denied him the position and the respect that he felt his talents demanded. He had seen the brave O.A.S. fail. He had been denied the chance to become an architect. He felt he had not succeeded in securing the respect of his father. Even in Canada, which he had seen as a land of opportunity, he had been sacked through no fault of his own. The image of himself which was to make him known all over the world and was to bring about his death was crystallizing. Those who knew the gangster before his imprisonment in Canada testify that during this period he changed a great deal. He seemed to become obsessed in his fantasies. Previously he had been a criminal because he enjoyed danger and high living. Now the enjoyment of danger and of the wealth he earned from his crimes became sublimated in his lust for fame.

The full fruition of his psychopathic vision of himself was still a few years away, but the seeds of it were fully implanted during the months after the murder trial. He saw himself as a gentleman-gangster, as the rare practitioner of honour in a mean and tawdry world. He wanted to dazzle. To the end of his life he retained the vulnerability of an insecure young actress in fear of bad press reviews. If the newspapers ignored his exploits, or portrayed him as an ordinary criminal, he was deeply upset. He needed to know that he was a public figure, that everyone knew his name. He depended on publicity like an addict needs a fix. During his life his portrayal of himself was to change. It was not the details that mattered. What was crucial was that he should be seen to be built on a heroic scale. He did not ask that people should necessarily like him. He craved only the recognition that he was important.

And as the weeks passed he began plotting, scheming to find a way out of the prison. He was by now being held in the maximum-security wing of the Saint Vincent de Paul prison at Laval, outside Montreal. It was the most secure prison accommodation in the country and had been built in 1968 at a cost of two and a

half million dollars. The cells were six feet by ten feet with a welded metal bunk bolted to the concrete floor. In the corner of each cell stood a cast aluminium lavatory and sink. There had been a public scandal in 1969 when a civil servant had claimed that the cells were equipped with gas jets so that the prisoners could be quietened if necessary. The allegation was denied by the Penitentiaries Commissioner, Allen J. McLeod, but the impression remained that the prison was ruthlessly efficient.

On 20 August 1972 there were sixty-two prisoners in the maximum-security wing, with sixty-five guards to ensure that they stayed there. On 21 August five of the prisoners escaped led by Jacques Mesrine.

The exercise-yard of the maximum-security wing was 335 feet by 275 feet, surrounded on three sides by two fifteen-feet-high fences, twelve feet apart. The fourth side of the exercise-yard was the prison building. Four observation towers overlooked the yard. At 9 a.m. on the morning of 21 August there were twenty-three men in the exercise-yard.

At 10.30 a.m. the prison alarm-bell sounded after one of the tower guards thought he saw some men moving in the bushes outside the prison. The convicts who were in the exercise-yard were led back into the main building, and a head count was organized. Six men were missing.

The prison authorities were dismayed when they saw how the men had escaped. The plan was outrageous in its simplicity. They had cut through the first fence, crawled across the grassy strip between the two fences, and then cut through the second fence. It transpired later that they had used a pair of pliers stolen from the prison metal workshop to cut the fences. The men who escaped were all serving between ten and twenty-five years. Immediately police reinforcements were drafted into the area, and search-parties were organized, equipped with rifles, shotguns and dogs. A police helicopter was brought in, to help in the search. As the escape was announced the bridges leading into Montreal were put under police guard.

One of the prisoners, Pierre Vincent, was recaptured shortly after the escape, but there was no sign of the other five. Half a mile away from the prison, on Highway 25, the criminals had stopped two motorists and commandeered their cars. Neither of the motorists was injured and the cars were later found abandoned.

Mesrine had done it. He had got out. But Jeanne was still in prison.

6

Mesrine wasn't satisfied. He and four others had got away from the supposedly escape-proof maximum-security wing of the Saint Vincent de Paul prison at Laval. The Canadian newspapers were full of stories about the escape. Politicians were furious, and the Solicitor General, Jean-Pierre Goyer, criticized the guards for not shooting the escaping prisoners. But Mesrine's desire for revenge against the Canadian authorities and for publicity was still ungratified. He now planned an even more outrageous coup – he intended to return to the prison and free the remaining prisoners in the top-security wing. To do this he needed a lot of money. With Jean-Paul Mercier, another of the runaways from Saint Vincent de Paul, he set about raising the money in the way he knew best – by stealing it.

Mesrine and Mercier were hiding together in a flat in the centre of Montreal, which had been rented by Suzanne Francoeur, a friend, who quickly became Mercier's lover.

Just five days after the escape Mercier and Mesrine set out to rob two banks, ninety miles away, in the area where Jean-Paul had lived before being sent to prison. They wanted to suggest to the police that they were hiding in that area, rather than in Montreal. The robberies went smoothly. They were armed with two revolvers and a sawn-off shotgun, but only used them to fire a warning shot. The second bank also had an electronically-controlled lock which Mesrine had to shoot open. The two robbers grabbed all the cash they could get hold of, and warned everyone in the bank not to do anything foolish: 'It's too nice a day to die.' The manager, wanting to impress his staff with his bravery, said that death would be preferable to surrender. 'Never say that. Next time we'll do it for you,' announced Jean-Paul as he fired his revolver, missing the terrified bank-manager's head by a fraction. The man remained silent.

On the long drive back to Montreal the two criminals saw a teenage girl hitch-hiking, and stopped to pick her up. Mesrine was driving very quickly and they told the girl that they were in rather a hurry. She asked what they did for a living, and was told that they were bankers; then she noticed a gun in the front of the car. Mesrine told her that it was to protect their money. 'There are so many thieves nowadays,' he said.

They had made 26,000 dollars out of the two robberies, but not quite enough to finance Mesrine's great scheme.

On 28 August 1972, exactly a week after the break-out, Jean-Paul and Jacques held up the Toronto Dominion Bank in Montreal. They were disguised, wearing wigs and dark glasses, and the robbery went according to plan and without any violence.

Mesrine was now ready to carry out his scheme. He intended to return to Saint Vincent de Paul and free the remaining prisoners in the top-security wing. Suzanne Francoeur and other friends of Mercier and Mesrine had rented three more flats in Montreal, under false names, and equipped each flat with sufficient food for three men for several days. Only the close friends of the two escaped convicts would be able to stay in these flats, but all the others would be equipped with fire-arms, one gun between two men, and would have to take their chance at remaining free. The day fixed for the new escape was 3 September.

It was a crazy plan. Mesrine and Mercier intended to drive up to the prison, at 2.30 in the afternoon, armed with sawn-off shot-guns. They planned to throw a pair of wire-cutting shears and several guns over the two perimeter wire fences into the exercise-yard. As they approached the prison it was obvious that the number of warders on duty had been increased since their escape. The two men were in a blue Chevrolet and Jean-Paul was driving. They had made sure that the petrol tank was almost empty, so that if they were fired at there would be less risk of the car exploding. They had another car parked a quarter-of-a-mile away, and Suzanne was at the wheel of a third waiting on the highway half-a-mile from the prison.

It was hopeless. As they drove down the side road to the prison Jacques and Jean-Paul saw that a police car was driving behind them and that a car full of armed prison guards was approaching them. Mesrine was unwilling to drive away ignominiously. For one thing the police car would certainly follow them, and they might well be caught. Secondly, having planned the attack on the prison, and spent money procuring arms and renting flats, he wanted to make the gesture of defiance towards the prison authorities. So he opened fire on the police car, shattering the windscreen and sending the car lurching into the ditch at the side of the road. The warders' car stopped suddenly. The guards all leapt into the ditch for cover and opened fire. Through a hail of bullets Jacques and Jean-Paul drove back

towards the highway, firing back at the warders. On the highway they rejoined Suzanne in the waiting car. They headed back towards Montreal, taking with them all the guns they had brought for the other prisoners. Several police cars sped past them in the other direction, racing towards the prison. Mesrine's face had been grazed by a bullet, and Mercier had been hit in the leg and in his right arm. As they drove towards the city they realized they might have to shoot their way through a road-block on the bridge into Montreal. They were lucky: the police had assumed that they would not return to the city, and they calmly drove into central Montreal and reached their flat.

The Canadian press could hardly believe the audacity of the attempted attack on the maximum-security wing. Mesrine and Mercier had been identified by the prison warders and were now the most wanted men in Canada. Every newspaper and television news-programme was full of the story. Not only had they shot at policemen and prison warders, but they had displayed a fearlessness that outraged the authorities. The insolence of runaway convicts returning to the very prison they had escaped from two weeks earlier was unforgivable; the police now had instructions to shoot Mesrine and Mercier on sight.

In the flat where they were hiding the two men watched the news-bulletins about themselves on television and passed the time by reading thrillers. Mercier needed time to recover from the wounds he had received. They also started planning their next crimes. The two men had become friendly in the maximum-security wing, but now that they had worked together, and miraculously survived the shoot-out, each was developing considerable respect and affection for the other. Jean-Paul was only twenty-eight, but he had already been sentenced to twenty-four years in prison for attempted murder and kidnapping. He was dazzled by Mesrine's intelligence and flair.

Mesrine was impressed by Mercier's bravery, and was pleased that the younger man, like himself, appreciated excellent food and wine and beautiful women. Both criminals liked to live stylishly and shared a love of the countryside and animals.

Six days after their attempt to storm the prison at Saint Vincent de Paul, Mesrine, Mercier and Suzanne decided to spend a day in the forests north-west of Montreal. It was a fine day, and they took a picnic lunch and several guns. The men were keen to have some shooting practice especially Jean-Paul, whose arm was still stiff from the bullet-wound.

They drove deep into the majestic forest, trying to avoid the areas in which they were most likely to meet other day-trippers and hunters. The day passed pleasantly. Mesrine and Mercier were both excellent marksmen, and each enjoyed flaunting his skill in front of the other. They pinned a paper target on to a tree. Mesrine shot first and got a bull's-eye. Mercier was not to be outdone. He tied a piece of string to a branch of the same tree, with one end hanging down in front of the bark. He raised his revolver, took aim and cut the string in half with a single shot. Mesrine congratulated his friend, and asked him whether he would rather lose his sense of smell or his sense of taste. Mercier thought for a moment, and then said that he would rather lose his sense of smell. Mesrine then strode over to where Mercier's jacket was lying on the ground, picked it up and took out his identity card from the breast pocket (needless to say, it was a card in a false name, one of several procured by the two men). He pinned the card to the tree, and stepped back about ten paces, lifted his gun and blasted a hole right through the nostrils of the photograph of Mercier.

In the late afternoon, at about 4.30, they decided to return to Montreal. They piled the fire-arms into the boot of the car, keeping one revolver with them in case of emergency. They set off, but half-an-hour later they found the track along which they were driving blocked by a truck. Two men in uniform stepped into the road. For a moment Mesrine and Mercier thought they were policemen, but then realized with relief that they were only forest rangers. The rangers had heard them shooting all day, and probably wanted to check that the 'hunters' had the regulation amounts of ammunition and weapons.

They asked Jean-Paul, Jacques and Suzanne to get out of their car and open the boot. They found well over a dozen guns, all loaded. The rangers pointed out that it was illegal to carry loaded fire-arms, and asked the culprits to follow them to the warden's office. Mesrine attempted to reason with the warders, to persuade them that they had only been practising their shooting before going hunting. Suddenly one of the rangers obviously realized where he had seen Mesrine's face before. But Mesrine was quicker than he was. As the older man gasped in horror: 'The escaped prisoners!' Mesrine shot him in the chest. Jean-Paul shot down the other forest ranger. Mesrine and Mercier dragged the bodies of the two men, by the feet, to a ditch a few feet away, threw them in and covered them with

dead branches and fallen leaves. For good measure Mesrine shot each man twice more in the head, and then the two criminals drove back, with Suzanne, to Montreal.

Two days later a search-party was organized for the missing forest rangers, and their bodies were found lying in the ditch, 150 feet from where their truck was parked. The crime was soon attributed to the two escaped convicts, and a reward of several thousand dollars was offered for their recapture, dead or alive.

The killing of the forest rangers received an enormous amount of publicity in Canada. Their names, Mederic Côté and Ernest Saint-Pierre, became familiar to every reader of the national newspapers. Their funeral was fully reported, and a photograph was published of Ernest Saint-Pierre's twelve-year-old son weeping beside his father's coffin. Mesrine later admitted that this photograph had upset him but that he had wondered whether the boy realized his father was authorized to kill in the name of the law.

Mesrine's attitude to the killing was that it was simply unlucky for all of them that they had encountered each other. He seems to have displayed no remorse, other than his sympathy for the child who had lost a parent. It is quite possible that this was the first time that Mesrine had killed a man. He said that he had shot people in Algeria, but there is no evidence to substantiate his claims. He later described in graphic detail how he had murdered several people in France before leaving for Canada in 1967. But there is little reason to believe him.

If the shooting of the forest rangers was the first 'murder' in which he had taken part, Mesrine certainly seems to have entered into the spirit of the occasion. He subsequently related in detail how he had shot the two men in the head after their bodies had been dumped in the ditch, and the police account of the injuries the victims had received confirms this. Mesrine said that he had wanted to make sure that they were dead. He had not hesitated to kill once recognized. The killing suggests that Mesrine may have been trigger-happy, but hardly justifies his claim to be a professional killer with a lust for blood. It also demonstrated his desire to remain free.

Mesrine, Mercier and Suzanne did not leave Montreal, even when the police announced that they were wanted in connection with the double murder. Jacques managed to get a message to Jeanne Schneider, who was still serving her five and a half years' sentence in prison. He offered to arrange for her escape,

but Jeanne, by this time, was ready to serve her sentence, rather than face the ordeal of life on the run with a man the police wanted for murder. She turned down Mesrine's offer.

Jacques and Jean-Paul continued their criminal activities. They held up a bank opposite their flat. Everything went smoothly. As the two robbers were leaving the bank one of the cashiers frowned at Mesrine. Three days later Mesrine and Mercier returned to the same bank and ordered the woman who had frowned at Mesrine to empty the tills while they raided the safes; Mercier kept Mesrine covered. Jean-Paul laughed at her as she filled up the bag she had been given with bank-notes, and when she had finished Mesrine removed a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to her as her share of the proceeds. Warning her not to grimace at them again or they would return a third time, they left the bank.

Robbing the same bank a second time was a wanton, theatrical gesture: it emphasized their recklessness and daring. It was very likely that after the first robbery the bank would have increased their security measures, but to Mesrine such considerations were less important than the public demonstration of the fact that he would not tolerate an insult, however slight, from even a minor employee of an organization he was robbing. He was becoming ever more confident, and his publicity stunts were making him more and more familiar to the Canadian public. He attracted attention by sending tape-recorded messages to newspapers complaining of conditions in the maximum-security wing of the Saint Vincent de Paul prison.

Mesrine took risks not only to gain publicity for himself, but because he found danger intoxicating. He would on occasion draw up beside a policemen when driving, and ask him the way to a particular address, even if he knew perfectly well how to find it. He would go out to eat in Montreal's most expensive restaurants, and join in the conversations of people sitting near him. He terrified the friends he was dining with on one occasion by interrupting a discussion at the next table about the inefficiency of the police in failing to recapture the two highly dangerous escaped criminals, Mesrine and Mercier. Mesrine apologized for butting in, but explained that it was a subject on which he felt very strongly. The police, he said, were subject to far too much criticism. The public failed to realize how brilliant some modern criminals were; the men who were still on the run were not just a couple of wild ruffians. They were intelligent and

cultured men, who could probably pass unnoticed anywhere in the city.

Mesrine then explained how difficult it was for the police to catch criminals unless the criminals were careless, or unless the police actually caught them in the process of committing a crime. Even though the police had photographs of the men, it was very difficult to identify them out in the street. Mesrine pointed out how easy it would be for the criminals to change their appearance radically just by growing beards or dyeing their hair. And so long as they were confident enough not to panic and run in the opposite direction as soon as they saw a policeman, the criminals were fairly safe. All the police could do was to wait for them to make a mistake.

At this point Mesrine apologized for talking so much. He offered the people at the next table a brandy, and was delighted when they accepted. He explained that he felt that the Canadian police did such a good job it was unfair that they should be critized. Montreal was, after all, one of the safest cities in North America, with the least violent crime. When Mesrine left the room for a few minutes the people whose conversation he had interrupted apologized to his friends for having upset him. They asked whether he himself was a policeman, or perhaps a politician? Mesrine's friends smiled nervously, and one of them explained that he was a businessman, but that he was very interested in the work of the police. When he returned they immediately said how tired they were and hustled him out of the restaurant.

Mesrine and Mercier were being helped during this period by several people. Mesrine had arrived in Montreal with introductions to half a dozen French residents who had been involved with the O.A.S. They had not been major figures in the movement, but they were prepared to help an ex-member, both by offering to hide him and by procuring false documents and papers. He had also been given the names of some Canadian criminals by friends in France, and he had made a few friends of his own in Montreal, some without any criminal record at all. Not only did these people offer practical assistance to Mesrine, but they also enabled him to lead an active social life. In general he avoided dinners and parties given by criminals because of the risk of the police informers, and because the wine was often second-rate, something he did not like. He would frequently go out to parties not given by criminals, taking the precautions of introducing himself by a false name and giving no one his

address. His friends were loyal and devoted to him. One of Jacques Mesrine's greatest assets was that he was able to inspire great loyalty. Men and women who had no previous involvement with crime were apparently prepared to risk conviction to help him. Although Mesrine always wanted to go out, to restaurants and nightclubs and parties, his friends were rather more cautious, and would arrange parties for him in hotels and motels, inviting only people they thought they could trust. Even these selected guests would not be told Mesrine's real name.

It was at one of these arranged parties that Mesrine met Jocelyne Deraiche. It was the autumn of 1972, a couple of months after his escape from Saint Vincent de Paul. She was nineteen years old, he was nearly thirty-six. A few people had been invited to a motel on the outskirts of Montreal. Jocelyne had been brought by a friend. She was offered a glass of champagne and introduced to the elegant, distinguished-looking Frenchman. He asked her her name, and told her that she should choose a name for him and he would then call himself by that name when he was with her. Jocelyne was naïve, young for her age and ravishingly beautiful. She assumed that the Frenchman was being flirtatious; it did not occur to her that there was a more sinister motive for his reluctance to identify himself. She did not know why Mesrine laughed when she said that she would call him Bruno. Only later did she discover that he had already applied for a passport in the name of Bruno Dansereau. Mesrine decided that he could trust her: later that same evening he explained to her who he really was. Jocelyne never read newspapers, but was shocked to discover that Jacques and Jean-Paul (who was also at the party) were on the run. She was horrified when, leaning back against a cushion and feeling it hard, she discovered a machine-gun. Jacques reassured her that she had nothing to worry about, and she was calmed by his apparent gentleness and concern. He talked about himself, and showed a great interest in her. Although he was supposed to be a dangerous criminal Jocelyne rapidly believed she was in no danger; she later said she had never felt as secure as she did with him. In the early hours of the morning she had to leave.

For Jocelyne the meeting had been overwhelming. She had left school only a year before, and since then had had several uninteresting jobs. She was one of nine children of a French-speaking, Catholic family who lived in a suburb of Montreal. Not only was Jacques an urbane and handsome Parisian, but he

lived dangerously. To Jocelyne he seemed wonderfully attractive. However, he had made no attempt to proposition her, and she assumed that she had seen him for the first and last time.

The next day Jacques telephoned her and that evening she returned to the motel and spent the evening with him. Jean-Paul and Suzanne were also there.

Again she had no reason to believe that she would ever see him again. She decided to go and stay with one of her sisters, who was married and lived about fifty miles away. After two days she had a telephone call from the friend who had taken her to the motel party where she had met Mesrine. Jocelyne was told that the Frenchman wanted to see her again. Although she had very little cash with her she was to take a taxi all the way back to Montreal, where she would be met by a friend of Jacques, who would pay the fare. She told her sister a lie that she knew was unconvincing, and returned to the city.

Jacques was delighted with his new mistress. He was enchanted by her looks and her youth. He was also aware of the practical advantages of having a woman with him. A couple are less suspicious than a single man or two men together, and the woman can more easily organize such necessities as renting flats and buying food. He was introduced to Jocelyne's parents. He showed Mme Deraiche and her daughters his card-tricks. The women were most impressed by Jocelyne's new boy-friend, who was so charming and obviously wealthy. It transpired later that, although he couldn't remember Mesrine's name M. Deraiche realized that he was one of the escaped criminals whose photographs had been published so often in the last few months in the press. Mesrine said afterwards that he knew at once that Jocelyne's father had recognized him. The older man apparently liked him, and he believed he would not tell the police.

Mesrine and Mercier had decided to leave Canada, and Suzanne and Jocelyne had agreed to go with them. The two men had applied for passports under false names. Jacques was Bruno Dansereau and Jean-Paul was Richard Ledoux. They had sent photographs of themselves disguised to the passport office. The police were aware of the possibility of the two men applying for passports in an attempt to leave the country, and were rigorously checking all passport applications. They recognized the two criminals' photographs despite their disguises. It was decided that the passports should be issued without comment. A raid on the address given would most likely fail to get the two men

themselves. The police were sure now, since they had not alerted Mesrine and Mercier, that they would get their men.

In their flat on the rue de Bellechasse the two couples were preparing for their journey. They had no idea that a trap had been set, and that they had been granted the passports only so that they could be arrested when they tried to leave the country. The women were arranging clothes for themselves and the men for a warmer climate.

Mesrine, Mercier and the women then slipped over the border, without passports, into America. It was important that they should have passports, but Mesrine knew that it was safer to avoid passport control at Canadian airports or docks. And although he did not know that the authorities had issued the passports knowing that they were in false names, he had never planned to use the passports. He had attached to their passport applications airline tickets to France, to support their claim that they needed the passports quickly because they had booked seats on a particular flight. This meant that the police were being less vigilant at the United States border than they might otherwise have been: they were sure that they knew the date on which the two men were leaving, and where they were going.

The journey into the U.S. was carefully planned. The route was first tested by some friends whose papers were in perfect order. They had no trouble at all, but they saw a car in front of them stopped by frontier guards. So when Mesrine and Mercier drove across the border they were preceded by a car driven by one of their friends with his wife and two children inside. They were followed by two more of their friends in another car. These two had drunk more than the permitted limit of whisky. If they saw that Jacques's car was stopped by the frontier officials they would ostentatiously drive past, quickly and wildly. The frontier officials would then almost certainly chase the third car and discover that the driver and passenger were drunk. Pursuing and arresting these obvious miscreants would distract them from the routine task of checking the papers of the two well-behaved couples in the car in front. The two men who had volunteered to drink so much whisky and then escort the criminals both had strong heads and could be relied on not to get themselves arrested unless it was necessary.

The two most wanted men in Canada and their girl-friends managed to cross the border into the U.S. without incident.

7

That evening the two couples arrived in New York and checked into the Waldorf Astoria, one of the world's most glamorous hotels. They spent ten days in the city delighting in the brittle confidence and zest for life of the New Yorkers. From time to time they would sit in the cool, spacious halls of the hotel, or drink numerous cocktails surrounded by palm trees, in the company of exquisitely-dressed residents. Then they would sweep out through the revolving doors on to Fifth Avenue and go shopping, buying Italian tailored suits for the men and dresses designed in Paris for the women. Jocelyne, the unsophisticated suburban girl, just out of school, blossomed into an elegant young woman. Mesrine delighted in choosing clothes for her that would emphasize her slim figure and highlight her porcelain skin. He knew better than she did what suited her and he taught her to appreciate beautiful materials, silk, lawn and cashmere. Suzanne, too, bought a whole new wardrobe. She did not have Jocelyne's radiant beauty, but she was pretty and cheerful-looking, and acquired a new confidence when she realized that she now looked like a wealthy young woman.

The criminals and their girl-friends were living like princes on the proceeds of the eight or so bank robberies they had carried out together in Canada. When they were not buying clothes or jewellery and accessories for the women, they explored the city. They ambled around the Metropolitan Museum, and whizzed up to the top of the Empire State building. Like tourists they went to Central Park, the Statue of Liberty, Greenwich Village, Broadway, and Brooklyn Bridge. By night they danced in the city's best nightclubs, and every day they ate in excellent restaurants. They tried New York's French food, then Italian, Mexican, Japanese. They ate monstrous cakes and watched celebrities in the Russian Tea Rooms. They dined several times at the Four Seasons.

But the stay in New York was not only a pleasure trip. Mesrine and Mercier wanted to establish themselves in a South American country, from which they would be able to return to the U.S. and Canada to 'work'. They were sure that it would be easier for them to remain free outside North America. They were also attracted to South America by the idea of the climate.

All they now had to do was to decide which country in South America to go to and then acquire the necessary entry papers.

Eleven years after the formation of the O.A.S., the members of the network had spread all over the world. In Montreal Mesrine had been in contact with ex-O.A.S. men. Now, in New York, he was advised to go to Venezuela. Members of the organization helped him procure entry papers and gave him names of fellow-members and sympathizers of the movement who would help him there. With the O.A.S. men in New York Mesrine began planning several large-scale robberies in the U.S.A., although he intended to live in South America. He introduced Jean-Paul Mercier to them, guaranteeing his skill and his reliability, and it was agreed that the Canadian should take part in the projected crimes.

Once the entry papers arrived the four 'tourists' immediately prepared to leave New York. Jocelyne later recalled a hair-raising experience at Kennedy Airport, just before they boarded the aircraft. As Jean-Paul walked through the passengers' metal detector, the alarm sounded. He was not carrying a gun, but he was afraid that the airport authorities would search him and look closely at his papers. They might then realize that he was a wanted man. He was escorted to a nearby office to be searched. The police found nothing and apologized for detaining him. They explained that the alarm sounded quite often for no apparent reason. He had been lucky. Only later did he realize that a bullet lodged in his leg from a gunfight a few years earlier had activated the metal detector.

In Venezuela the four fugitives stayed first at the leading hotel in Caracas, the Macuto Sheraton on the sea-front. Mesrine marshalled his entourage for a further round of high living. There was a new city to explore, a new way of life. In the city's night-clubs they met representatives of the various groups resident in Caracas. There were the old Spanish families, there were the recent immigrants, usually wealthy Europeans, and there were criminals on the run. They spent long days on the beach; they went sailing and deep-sea fishing. They then moved out of the hotel into a beautiful villa by the sea, which Jacques rented. It was by far the most elegant house Jean-Paul, Suzanne and Jocelyne had ever lived in, with a large well-stocked garden and its own swimming-pool. Jacques hired two maids, a gardener and a handyman. He was still living under the name on the passport he had acquired in Canada, Bruno Dansereau. To his staff

and the local people he was known respectfully as 'Don Bruno'. In Venezuela, they found, money opened most doors. Mesrine and Mercier opened a bank account in Caracas. No references were wanted and no questions were asked about where the considerable sum they deposited in cash had come from.

Life in South America was comfortable. Mesrine made new friends, including a senior police official, who told him that as a wealthy citizen it was important that he should be armed to protect himself and his property. The policeman obtained a revolver for Mesrine, and later introduced him to the officer in charge of bank protection in Caracas. Mesrine entertained them a number of times at the villa. The irony of the situation did not escape him.

With the help of ex-O.A.S. men resident in Venezuela, Mesrine and Mercier planned a series of robberies in America and in a couple of South American countries. Mesrine liked Venezuela and intended to settle there. There was no language problem: while he had been married to Soledad he had become moderately fluent in simple Spanish. He liked the warm climate and he was hoping that he would be able to bring Sabrina out to join him. She was by now eleven years old, and he had not seen her for four years. Although the villa had been completely furnished before they moved in, Jacques was redecorating it and buying new furniture. As with everything else, he was a perfectionist about where he lived, and would spend a long time deliberating on exactly where to hang a painting, or over the choice of material for curtains.

He bought two German sheepdogs to guard the house and grounds. One of the dogs attacked Jocelyne, biting her on the leg. After that, the dog, who was called Negro, was kept on a leash during the day. He was, however, incredibly strong, and a few days later he broke his chain and leapt at Suzanne, sinking his enormous teeth into her face and trying to drag her along. Suzanne was shrieking with pain as Jacques and Jean-Paul tried desperately to pull the animal off her. Jean-Paul had to beat the dog again and again as hard as he could before it relaxed its grip. Suzanne's face was badly mauled. There were several deep gashes oozing blood. Mesrine and Mercier immediately rushed her to hospital. Jocelyne attempted to comfort her and to stop the bleeding.

The staff at the hospital in Caracas dressed the wounds but

advised Suzanne that she should seek further treatment in Montreal. In Venezuela they did not have the facilities to carry out the plastic surgery that would be necessary. Suzanne wanted to return to Canada alone, but Jean-Paul insisted that she could not travel alone in her condition. He knew that it was dangerous for him to return to his own country, but he was determined to escort Suzanne. Jacques and Jocelyne drove them to the airport and they all sadly said goodbye, although the two men spoke with apparent confidence of Mercier's return to Caracas.

Jacques later described how shocked he had been by the violence of the sheepdog. But he noticed how the animal, which had been so savage towards Suzanne, did not resist at all when Jean-Paul had later attacked it, nearly killing the animal in his fury. According to Mesrine, Negro simply licked Mercier's hand, as if in apology. Mesrine believed that the killer-dog recognized the killer-man. He found irresistible the idea that even an animal should perceive and respect the importance and ruthlessness of a man. However, he realized that he had to get rid of the dog.

Soon after Jean-Paul and Suzanne had returned to Canada they telephoned Mesrine. Suzanne's treatment had gone well, but they were afraid that the police were on their trail. The F.B.I. had apparently made inquiries at the Waldorf Astoria ten days after they had left, and Jean-Paul had read in the Canadian press that he and Mesrine were believed to be in South America.

Mesrine decided reluctantly that it might be safer for him to return to France for a while. He did not want to leave Venezuela, and he regretted having to abandon the money-making plans he had so carefully worked out. He arranged to continue renting the villa while he was away, and paid his staff for six months in advance. He hoped that he would soon be able to return to Caracas. A day or two after Mercier's telephone call Mesrine's friend who was a police official came to warn him that Interpol was on his trail, and that he must leave the country immediately. The policeman told him that he could make sure there was no trouble with customs or passport control, if Mesrine got out straight away.

Within twenty-four hours Jacques and Jocelyne were on a plane to Madrid. Mesrine decided that it would be safer to enter Spain and then drive over the border into France, rather than fly directly to Paris. Arriving in Spain after the New World felt

to Mesrine like coming home. Of all the European countries except France, Spain was the one he knew best. Memories of the days he had spent there came flooding back to him.

For nearly five years now he had lived in the Americas, with their motorways, their skyscrapers and their fast-food chains. Now the small, scrubby streets of Madrid with tumbledown, dirt-stained buildings and ancient, half-hidden houses of surprising grandeur seemed wonderfully familiar. The people, too, wearing heavy coats to keep out the cold winds that swept off the frozen plains of Andalusia, were to Mesrine unmistakably European. Walking through the streets of Madrid he felt exhilarated, as if all the years spent abroad had been just an episode, a break from his real career, which lay here in Europe.

The shopkeepers, the grocers and wine-merchants, even the roadsweepers, seemed to come from a more ancient culture than anything the Canadians had dreamt of. The banks, too, held a lustre which none of the concrete and plate-glass banks of the New World could emulate. After spending a day showing Jocelyne the sights of Madrid he made preparations for the drive in a hire car into France. They crossed the frontier at Hendaye without being searched. As they sped towards Mesrine's parents' house in Normandy he felt the years roll off him. He was once again the youthful Frenchman who had flown out of France in the autumn of 1967. When he left he had been a relatively small-time crook; he had been undecided about what he was to do with his life. It had still been just possible that he would resign himself to a quiet and undistinguished life on the straight and narrow.

Now the die was cast. While in Canada, in prison, he had resolved that for him there would be no more half-measures: he would become the best-known criminal in the world, dazzling in his audacity and style. Returning to Europe made him realize that he had been wrong to envisage settling in Venezuela. Looking out at the Normandy orchards with their leaf-spattered trees as he drove along, he felt with passionate conviction that France was the proper stage for his activities. Nowhere else was there the sense of theatre, nowhere else would people understand the charm and daring of a life gaily risked on the throw of a die or the speed of a policeman's hand to his gun. And though it was possible to become rich through crime anywhere else in the world, nowhere else would there be much point in it. Only in France would his charm and daring be fully appreciated,

would it be possible to spend the proceeds with such style. He thought of Lacenaire, the great poet-murderer of the nineteenth century, and laughed at the thought of the trail he himself would blaze, which would dwarf such petty pretensions. At the time of Algeria, France had pathetically ignored the great traditions of conquest, the valiant endeavour and military splendour of Louis XIV and Napoleon, in favour of a thriving industrial society. It was left to a criminal fighting against the mediocrity engulfing the nation to redeem the heritage of the great Frenchmen of the past. So, as he arrived at his parents' comfortable country house, Mesrine saw himself almost as an exiled prince returning to claim his heritage and partake in the glory to which he felt himself entitled.

M. amd Mme Mesrine were not in Normandy at the time, and the two fugitives left early the next day. Jacques knew that the gardener came into the house every morning. It was important that he should not find the couple or even know that they had been there. Mesrine did not want to risk the police finding out that he had returned to France. He thought it best now to move on to Paris.

Jocelyne was entranced by Paris. She and Jacques spent their first few days there staying in hotels. Throughout her childhood in French-speaking Canada she had regarded Paris as the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan city in the world; now she found herself there, as the companion of an attractive and worldly Parisian. She was delighted when Mesrine rented a pretty, two-storey house in the riverside town of Mantes-la-Jolie, thirty miles from Paris.

It was the beginning of December 1972, just over three months since Mesrine and Mercier had broken out of the top-security wing of the prison at the Saint Vincent de Paul. Mesrine now decided that he should persuade Mercier and Suzanne to join him in Paris. He telephoned a mutual friend in Montreal, hoping to get in touch with Jean-Paul. He was horrified to hear that two days earlier, on 4 December, Mercier had been captured during a bank hold-up in Montreal. Suzanne had also been taken. Mesrine was deeply upset by the news, and decided he must arrange for them to escape. But first he had to acquire some money.

Many of his old criminal contacts had disappeared or been imprisoned during the last five years. Mesrine made contact again with those who remained, and set to work. He amassed a

collection of arms. He acquired six sets of identity papers, two of them purporting to belong to a policeman. For Jocelyne, too, he provided false papers.

On 8 December Mesrine stole 270,000 francs from a bank, and three days later he robbed a factory in Mantes-la-Jolie of some 300,000 francs, cash intended as wages for the employees. In the next three months the police believe he carried out about ten further armed robberies.

Jacques carefully arranged to meet his parents and Sabrina. With Jocelyne he met them in a Paris restaurant. Jacques was upset by the meeting – his father had lost a great deal of weight since he last saw him. He had cancer, and Mesrine remarked that if he had not escaped from the Canadian prison he would never have seen his father again. He was delighted to see Sabrina and his mother, although he was well aware that it was going to be increasingly difficult for him to see them again. He knew that the police hunt for him was likely to start up in France before too long.

He was right. Shortly afterwards he escaped being captured by an extraordinary stroke of luck. He decided to buy a car from a garage in Mantes. He had chosen the model. The garage-owner came round to his house to discuss what colour car Jacques wanted, and before leaving, casually mentioned that two men had been to see him the day before, asking what he knew about Jacques and Jocelyne. He had thought they might be policemen, and as he had no love for the police, he had not told them anything. Mesrine explained that he was involved in politics, and asked the garage-owner to tell him if they turned up again. He chatted casually as he saw the man to the door. But no sooner had the man left than Mesrine yelled to Jocelyne to start packing. Every time they decamped in a hurry the fugitives had to abandon most of their possessions. Once again they packed the minimum of clothing, and as many guns as they could manage. Making sure that they were not being followed they drove to a friend's house to spend the night.

The next day Jacques rented a new flat in Boulogne-Billancourt, a suburb west of Paris. He produced one of his many passports as proof of his identity. The landlord was a judge who worked out of Paris. The new tenant of the flat introduced himself to the neighbours as Nicolas Scaff, an architect. Wherever Mesrine was hiding he always made sure that he knew people who lived nearby. He was aware that people are much more

likely to mistrust someone they do not know. If he was friendly and apparently open with the neighbours, they would be more likely to dismiss any suggestion that he might be a wanted man.

The new flat, at 1, rue Pierre Grenier, was more luxurious than the little house Jacques and Jocelyne had lived in at Mantes. Jacques was fanatical about cleanliness wherever he lived. He dared not risk hiring a maid to clean: there were so many guns there that it would have been impossible to hide them. But he was quite willing to do the housework himself, and encourage domesticity in Jocelyne. As ever, Jacques enjoyed parties and large gatherings, and he continued to frequent the best restaurants and nightclubs. But he also spent a good deal of time in the flat, either alone with Jocelyne or with one or two other friends. He would play chess or card games, read and listen to music. His favourite singers were Nana Mouskouri and Edith Piaf. Sometimes he took Jocelyne to the theatre, or to a cinema. His favourite films were about crime and gangsters, and he would enjoy pointing out the inaccuracies in them to Jocelyne.

The cooking was usually done by Jacques, rather than Jocelyne. His standards were so high that she hardly dared try to meet them. He used to spend a long time shopping, discussing the food with the shopkeepers, and if he thought their produce was not good enough he would go elsewhere. He was never satisfied with a recipe. No matter how delicious it was, he was always attempting to improve it, to perfect it. He loved lamb, roasted with rosemary and garlic, rare, as is usual in France, and he also liked cooking lobster and other seafoods. He despised other people's willingness to tolerate the second-rate in their lives. He loathed the idea of a life in which excellence had no place. He could not understand how anyone could bear not to eat as well as possible. Or that people were prepared to go out looking dirty and untidy. His snobbery was one of style, not wealth or class; he was more outraged by the slovenliness of people who had money than by the dowdiness of the poor.

As they had abandoned so many of their clothes in the house in Mantes, Mesrine and Jocelyne went shopping for replacements. In New York Jacques had taken his girl-friend to the most expensive shops. Now he took her to the most distinguished dressmakers. He supervised her hair-cuts, and even advised her about make-up. As his consort she had to be supremely elegant.

For Jocelyne life was not altogether easy. She always had to look perfect and live up to Jacques's very high standards, but

she was also forbidden to open her mouth in public. Every *flic* in France was looking for 'Mesrine and his Canadian girl-friend'. Jocelyne had a strong Quebec accent. The risk of attracting attention to themselves was judged by Jacques to be too great. She had to stay silent unless they were alone or with trusted friends.

Mesrine had by now gathered around him a group of about a dozen men he trusted. To describe them as a 'gang' would be misleading. He rarely worked with more than one or two of them at a time, and some of them were not criminals. Their main function was to maintain and strengthen Jacques's security. They helped to make sure that his flat was not being watched, and they assisted him in planning crimes, hiding the proceeds of robberies and so on. Some of them were criminals he had known for a long time, or friends of theirs. Others Mesrine had merely met and decided to trust. And one or two, inevitably, were remnants of the O.A.S.

But Jacques always ensured that he remained in control of the group. Some of them did not know each other. That was as Mesrine wanted it. He knew that he inspired loyalty in men and women, and he trusted his ability to assess people. But he also knew that almost everyone has his price, and that the most discreet of men could mistakenly trust a mistress or wife and say too much. So it was important that he should remain in control, and that the others should carry out particular tasks under his instructions. He remembered the vital O.A.S. lesson that wherever possible no one must be allowed to know enough to betray others. Although he made sure that none of them ever knew the complete truth about his activities, and although he frequently took precautions against betrayal by any of them – most of them did not know where he lived – each felt that Mesrine trusted him completely. His charisma was such that they all appeared to have felt privileged to be able to help him.

One of Mesrine's friends moved into their flat in the rue Pierre Grenier. He was Michel Grangier, a twenty-six-year-old criminal from Lyons known as 'le Lyonnais'. Jacques was fond of him, and passed on to the younger man a lot of his knowledge about crime. Mesrine trusted him more than his other aides, but even Michel knew relatively little about Mesrine's activities. And Mesrine demanded an iron discipline from Michel as from all his men. None of them ever dared arrive at the flat without telephoning first, according to a prearranged code. The code was

such that phrases signifying that everything was all right, and phrases signifying danger both sounded natural and innocent.

Jocelyne later related a frightening experience when, for no apparent reason, Michel failed to return to the flat for three days. Mesrine was becoming very worried and was sure that the police must have taken him. He told Jocelyne that he was going to go to all the police stations, find Michel and bring him back! He began to assemble the guns he was going to take with him. Suddenly 'le Lyonnais' walked in. Mesrine was furious and almost attacked his friend before checking himself. Speechless, he waited for an explanation of what now seemed to have been nothing more than irresponsible behaviour. Michel was touched by what he correctly interpreted as proof of Mesrine's concern for him. He explained that, three days before, he had realized he was being followed. He thought that he had managed to throw off his pursuers, but he didn't want to take any chances. He had kept moving, checking that he was not still being tailed. He decided not to risk returning to the flat, or even telephoning. Mesrine shook him by the hand, pleased by the younger man's caution and delighted that he had avoided being arrested.

Mesrine enjoyed having another man living in the flat. He always adored women, and enjoyed all the paraphernalia of femininity, beautiful clothes and scents, women's emotions and the sound of female voices. But he was also sentimental about the importance and value of masculine friendships, although these were in general denied him because of his constant need for security. He was also attracted to masculinity and was always ready to admire other men for their intelligence, their bravery or their strength. He felt that it was right that he should be surrounded by men of physical and mental excellence. His narcissism seems to have been a reflection of his involvement with his ideal of manhood. He always dressed immaculately, unless he was intentionally disguising himself. On more than one occasion he wore a jacket of the softest grey suede, tailored to emphasize his broad shoulders, when he was robbing banks. He was obsessed by keeping his body as fit and supple as possible, and would practise yoga and gymnastics daily. When he could he played squash or tennis. His attitude to his physical abilities was exactly the same as his approach to cooking: he was never satisfied with what he could do. His perpetual self-improvement was not only concerned with fitness. He always made sure that his nails were beautifully manicured, and he would watch care-

fully as his hair was being cut, to make sure that the hairdresser did not take off too much here, or leave too much there. He would spend a long time shaving in the morning, and would then usually shave again before dinner, even if he was dining with only close friends.

Jacques Mesrine was convinced that he was no ordinary man. It was by now the spring of 1973. Before the year was out all France would have reason to agree with him.

8

Mesrine knew that the police would probably catch up with him. He knew also that if they did, he would be tried in order for the crimes he had allegedly committed. The first were relatively minor – they involved passing dud cheques in 1967, while he was the licensee of the inn at Vieux-Moulin. Mesrine knew that the trial for these offences would be held at Compiègne, the nearest town with a court. He decided, therefore, as a precaution, to visit the Palais de Justice in Compiègne, to see how it would be possible to escape from the court, if it were necessary.

He set out from Boulogne-Billancourt one day, driving alone along the route Eugénie through the magnificent oak and beech forest of Compiègne, until he reached the small and ancient town of the same name, about fifty miles from Paris. He parked his car and sauntered into the Palais. After exploring the building he strolled around the nearby streets, drawing a plan of their layout as he did so. Three days later he returned to Compiègne with some friends, and showed them exactly what they would have to do if he was on trial there. He showed them where they should park the get-away car, and the quickest route out of the town. Then he took them into the Palais de Justice and showed them where guns could be hidden.

He had carefully planned his escape before being arrested. Having done so, Mesrine felt considerably more relaxed. He was working hard. In the first two months of 1973 he was probably involved in about fifteen hold-ups. The exact number will never be known as Mesrine was an efficient enough criminal to leave few clues that would enable the police to attribute the crime definitely to him. But it seems likely that every four days or so, on average, he would set out, with one or sometimes two guns,

and take all the cash he could find in a particular bank. Occasionally he would commit a crime on the spur of the moment, but in general he made detailed plans before he attempted a hold-up. He developed a habit of committing two robberies in succession, driving straight from the scene of one crime to the next. He even carried out one major robbery entirely alone.

Each time he walked into a bank, armed, and held it up, he was risking not only arrest but possible death in a shoot-out. Yet he courted danger. Again and again he would spend longer than he needed to in a bank, either talking to the staff, or making quite sure that there was no money left behind. Mesrine had always been a brave man, but he was now consciously training himself to feel less fear. He was sure that by overcoming the traces of instinctive fear he still felt, he would fulfil his potential. A 'normal' criminal, hearing a bank's alarm signal, would probably bolt as quickly as possible, hardly bothering about the proceeds of the raid, anxious only to escape the police. But Mesrine sometimes seemed to deliberately wait until the last possible moment before leaving the scene of a crime, unwilling to go until the police were after him.

On one occasion he was robbing a branch of Crédit Lyonnais in Paris when a cashier accidentally pushed the alarm button on the floor with her foot. Mesrine afterwards related how terrified she looked when she realized what she had done. 'Don't be afraid,' he told her as he carried on emptying the safes. 'I like working to music.' He then walked calmly out of the bank into the street. With his gun under his belt and the money in his brief-case, he stood in the street like the other passersby, apparently trying to locate the noise of the siren that was tearing through the midday air.

Mesrine was gaining stature in the underworld. Interpol was now co-ordinating the international search for him, and rumours of his extraordinary audacity were constantly reaching the ears of the Parisian criminal fraternity. Before he went to Canada he had hardly been known at all to the hard core of the *milieu*. But now he was beginning to win respect, although most criminals were suspicious of him. His middle-class Clichy background and his insistence that no one should ever know everything about his activities were atypical. The *milieu*, the traditional Paris underworld is an endlessly interlocking network of cliques and gangs. Some of these gangs are based on professional skills, such as specialized knowledge of silver and how to sell it. Others are

based on an area of operation: a group of criminals might run most of the housebreaking and 'protection' of nightclubs and restaurants in a particular *quartier* of Paris. Yet other gangs consist of criminals who all originate from the same region of France, such as Marseilles and Nice. The most powerful of the regional gangs is the legendary Union Corse, the Corsican Mafia.

There is an ever-changing pattern of co-operation and hostility among all these groups, as well as considerable overlap among members. For a large enterprise, several gang-leaders may get together and pool their information and the skills of their men. On the other hand, there are constant petty battles between gangs who believe that a rival *bande* has encroached on its territory, or is interfering in its speciality. And in crime, as in other fields of commercial activity where talent is vital, a particularly skilled individual may be 'head-hunted' by a rival organization, lured by the promise of more money to abandon his present employers. His going is not necessarily looked on by the gang who lose a member as a betrayal. Crime is a sophisticated business, and so long as the departing operative in no way damages his ex-comrades, his right to a 'transfer' is often accepted.

Jacques Mesrine did not fit into this closely interwoven fabric of gangland. He did not come from a criminal background, and was too much of an egotist and a loner. He did not trust other criminals – he often said he would rather trust a policeman he could respect than most criminals. So he kept himself apart from the major criminal networks. This was the way he wanted it, and he was pleased that he was beginning to be taken seriously by the underworld. He was determined, however, during the first few months of 1973, to emphasize to Paris criminals that although he was in many ways unlike them, he merited their respect. Throughout his life he refused to tolerate any insult to himself or his women.

There was some quarrel between Mesrine and either the proprietor or one of the prostitutes working in the 'Dixie', a bar in the rue Godot-de-Mauroy, near the place de la Madeleine. The exact details of the disagreement are impossible to establish; each of Mesrine's associates gives a different 'authoritative' version. But, whatever the truth behind the quarrel, Mesrine felt that he had a score to settle. On 5 March at about 7.15 p.m., he walked into the bar. Ten minutes later he was threatening the cashier and the other customers with a Colt 45. Violently he

swept his free hand along the shelf behind the bar, sending dozens of bottles and glasses crashing to the ground. He smashed the large mirror behind the shelf with the barrel of his gun, and swung back towards the customers. He caught sight of a policeman standing in the doorway.

A girl had slipped out of the 'Dixie' and alerted a patrol car when Mesrine had started smashing the place up. The policeman also had a gun in his hand. Mesrine fired first, and the policeman slumped to the ground. Jacques turned and ran out through the back of the bar, finding himself in a small courtyard. Without hesitating he rushed into the next-door building and gingerly made his way through to the entrance-hall. As he came up to the front door he caught a glimpse of a second policeman, telephoning for reinforcements. Mesrine later said that there had been a brief space of time before the policeman saw him when he could have shot him dead, but that he decided not to. The policeman was less hesitant and, seeing Mesrine in the doorway, fired two shots in his direction, both of which thudded into the door-frame.

Already the sirens of several more police cars could be heard closing in. Mesrine turned and ran up the main staircase, sure that his only hope was to try to get out on to the roof of the building. Reaching the first-floor landing he smashed the glass in a window, and climbed out on to the flat roof which connected with the back of the buildings in the next street. High, iron railings stood between Mesrine and a row of shuttered windows opposite. He didn't hesitate. Gripping the bar which ran just under the spikes on top of the railings, Mesrine hauled himself up until he could get a foothold on the bar, and without pausing leapt down the other side. The screams in the rue Godot-de-Mauroy, the sirens and the sound of breaking glass nearby had disturbed most of the local residents. Several shutters opened, but were closed immediately when an armed man was seen on the roof.

Mesrine was desperate. He ran to the nearest window and smashed the shutters. A small middle-aged woman stood facing him. He realized that he must look terrifying – he was clutching a gun, and his hands had been cut when he broke the mirror in the bar. He told the woman not to be afraid, to stay calm and to show him the way out. She led him downstairs to the front of the building in the rue Vignon. Mesrine peered out of the door, saw no policemen and ran off towards the boulevard de la

Madeleine, 200 yards away. There he found a parked taxi, jumped in and ordered the driver to take him to a particular spot, a few streets away, from where he would be able to walk to a friend's apartment. Mesrine showed the driver his gun, and warned him that it would be best if he forgot what his passenger looked like. He then put 500 francs on the seat beside the driver. Before he left the taxi Mesrine thanked the man and slipped into the crowd, turning up a few minutes later at a flat where he knew he would be safe. It was about 8.30. Later that evening Mesrine was driven back to the rue Pierre-Grenier, where Jocelyne was waiting for him.

The next day's newspapers were full of the story of the unknown gunman of the rue Godot-de-Mauroy. The policeman, Gilbert Fery, was apparently severely wounded, but was going to live. A police tracker-dog had followed the trail to the place Madeleine, but had then lost it. The police speculated whether the gunman might have disappeared into the Madeleine Métro station or persuaded one of the area's many prostitutes to drive him away. One prostitute was quoted in many of the newspapers as saying that a wounded man had approached her and asked her to drive him to hospital, but that she had refused. Madame Julienne Hirsch, the woman whose flat Mesrine had burst into, told the press that he had not been at all rough with her, but that she had been rather frightened. The taxi driver had not come forward. There seemed to be no hope of identifying the man who had shot the policeman. Mesrine thought he was safe. But the police were on to him, although they did not yet know that he was the man who had smashed up the 'Dixie'.

They had managed to identify some of his accomplices in his recent raids, and had been watching their movements. They had followed one of them to Boulogne-Billancourt, to Mesrine's flat. Throughout Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday, 6 and 7 March, they watched the flat. Several times Mesrine went out and returned, unaccosted. The police suspected that he had in his possession several fire-arms, and were afraid of provoking a shoot-out. They moved reinforcements in, surrounding the building. At about 6.15 p.m. on Thursday, 8 March, Mesrine left the flat once again. He had invited half a dozen friends to dinner, and was going out to buy bread, meat and wine. Twenty minutes later he returned, his arms full of bags of food and bottles. In the hall of the building half a dozen armed policemen closed in on him, pointing their weapons at his head. Others

grabbed hold of him. 'Don't move, Jacques, or you're dead,' Inspecteur Dormier from Versailles growled. The parcels Mesrine was carrying crashed to the ground, the bottles shattering and the steak falling out of its bag. He regained his self-control as a young policeman deftly handcuffed his wrists behind his back. He smiled at his captors. 'Well done. You make your Canadian colleagues look like children. Congratulations! But you've been lucky.' The police led Mesrine up to the eleventh floor, to his flat. They wanted to arrest Jocelyne and any of his accomplices who might turn up. The *concierge* was amazed to see the quiet gentleman in the custody of a crowd of armed policemen. 'Tell the judge who let me the flat that his tenant was one of the most wanted men in the world,' Mesrine said as he was marched past her.

They reached the door. Mesrine knocked, calling out to Jocelyne that it was he, and that the police were with him. There was no reaction. Jocelyne explained later that she had been overwhelmed by terror and had tried to think what Mesrine would have wanted her to do. Mesrine called out to her again, in a voice which permitted no argument, to open the door. Jocelyne realized that the dream-life she had been living with Mesrine for the last few months was over. Listlessly she opened the door. There was nothing else she could do. Policemen swarmed into the flat, until there were several in each room. Jocelyne was handcuffed, and tied to a sofa. The flat was systematically searched – every carpet was lifted, every drawer emptied and the top and bottom of every cupboard were carefully examined. Even the mattresses were cut open. The police checked that there were no loose floorboards or recesses behind furniture.

The guns were quickly found. In all there were eight revolvers, a machine-gun, three carbine rifles and four shotguns, two with sawn-off barrels. There were also about a thousand rounds of ammunition. The police also found three black hoods (although it would have been most uncharacteristic of Mesrine to wear such things when burgling), a pile of false passports, and five unused, false identity cards. There were French, German, Italian, Swiss, Canadian and American driving licences. There was also a vast amount of money in travellers' cheques – 4000 Swiss francs, 350,000 lire, 105 pounds sterling, 2500 U.S. dollars and 2000 Canadian dollars. As the hoard was uncovered the police became increasingly amazed.

The doorbell rang. A police inspector opened the door, and

as Michel Grangier stepped into the room, he was grabbed and handcuffed. Knowing that Mesrine was giving a dinner party that evening he had assumed the coast was clear and not bothered to telephone first, as he had been trained to do. The younger man was made to sit next to Mesrine and Jocelyne while the police continued their search. At about nine o'clock the telephone rang. The police ordered Mesrine to pick it up immediately. He did so, lifting it up on the second ring. The caller hung up at once, as Mesrine knew he would. It was part of the pre-arranged code between Mesrine and his friends that if all was well none of them should pick up the telephone until the fourth ring. Mesrine laughed in relief. He knew that the guests he had invited would now be able to warn each other not to turn up in Boulogne-Billancourt. The police suspected what had happened, but were not too dismayed. They had Mesrine; they could pull in the small fry at leisure.

The three prisoners were driven to Versailles. They arrived at about ten o'clock, and were questioned until the early hours of the morning. At the crack of dawn the next day the interrogation started again. Mesrine had spent the night in a special escape-proof cell. The police were not taking any risks with him. They knew he had escaped twice from Canadian prisons. The other two had been put in the ordinary cells. It soon became obvious to Mesrine that the police were trying to attribute to him most of the crimes committed in the past four months that they could not solve. He was flattered by this.

Jocelyne remembered that Mesrine had once told her that if ever they were arrested she should pretend that she knew nothing at all about his criminal activities. Mesrine repeatedly told the police that they should release her because she was only a kid, and had not been involved in anything illegal. The police had no intention of letting her go, but her youth and beauty did help to convince them that she might be innocent of anything serious. Michel was an experienced interrogee. He said nothing. All day the three were questioned. The police worked in relays. For a couple of hours an inspector would exhaust himself and one of the prisoners trying to establish the truth about a particular incident. He would then have a rest; after a break, a few glasses of wine, a nap, a *tisane*, a chat with his mates, he might have another go at the prisoner. But Jacques, Jocelyne and Michel were separated, and there was no rest, just the occasional cup of coffee in one of the 'soft spells' during the interrogation.

After a particularly violent session, during which the prisoner was told that he had no hope of proving his innocence, the police tried a subtler, more gentle approach. Suddenly the interrogator would be calm and reasonable, and offer coffee, cigarettes and pieces of chocolate. He would then suggest to the prisoner that coming clean would help them get off with a lighter sentence.

Mesrine's surprise at being accused of crimes he had not even heard about was nothing compared to the shock he gave the police. When it was suggested that he had been responsible for the murder of a small-time villain, whose body had been found near Versailles, Mesrine was reproachful, saying, 'You know I wouldn't hurt a fly, Monsieur le Commissaire.' The Commissaire was unconvinced. He was aware of Mesrine's underworld reputation for ruthlessness, that Mesrine was considered to be a man one crossed only at one's peril. It was a reputation Mesrine had carefully encouraged through his boasting and through the blood-curdling tales he told of revenges he had taken on his enemies. The policeman was feeling relaxed. He sat back in his chair and studied Mesrine. Jovially he asked him, 'Come on, Mesrine, tell me the truth. How many people have you killed in your career? I know they've all been villains, but tell me how many.' Mesrine looked him in the eye: 'Thirty-nine,' he said.

Mesrine was allowed to say goodbye to Jocelyne before they were taken to their separate prisons. He assured her that there was nothing for which the police could hold her for very long and said that whatever happened she must remain calm. As he was being ushered into the armoured van that would take him to prison, Mesrine turned to the nearest policeman. It was the Commissaire to whom Mesrine had 'confessed' the total number of his murders. 'What do you bet me I'll be out in three months?' he asked him. The policeman smiled: he knew Mesrine wouldn't get away. He was being taken to the Paris prison of La Santé, and no one had ever escaped from there.

Mesrine was again headline news in the French press. They had got hold of his claim to have killed thirty-nine people. He was dubbed 'the man of the thirty-nine murders'. The press was delighted by the image of a dangerous man, wanted on both sides of the Atlantic, living quietly with a twenty-year-old beauty in a Paris suburb. And the manner of his arrest, with not a shot fired, seemed a great triumph for the police. Every report of the case mentioned Jacques's charm and good looks and his taste

for high living. The gentleman gangster, and the charming debonair killer, are clichés of which newspapers never seem to tire. The story was revived a few days later when one of the guns found in Mesrine's flat was identified as the weapon which had fired the bullet which struck Gilbert Fery at the 'Dixie' the previous Monday. 'The mad gunman of the rue Godot-de-Mauroy was Public Enemy No. 1,' the newspapers said, making the most of the story: Mesrine was newsworthy.

Jocelyne and Michel were taken to different prisons. Jocelyne said later that a few weeks in the women's prison at Fleury-Mérogis had been a more coarsening experience than six months with Mesrine and his criminal associates. She had no idea how long she would have to spend there; and she was completely cut off from Jacques. For seven weeks they were allowed to correspond. On 18 May Jocelyne was freed. She was still under judicial control, and could be recalled to prison at any time. But even conditional liberty was sweet after the squalor and violent atmosphere of the prison. She went to stay with some friends of Jacques who were not closely involved with his criminal career.

For Mesrine the endless round of questionings went on. A deputation of Canadian policemen arrived to interrogate him. They showed him a file of photographs of suspects and asked whether he had worked with any of them in Montreal. He later recalled that when he said he did not recognize any of them, the Canadians told him they hadn't expected him to: the trip had given them a good excuse to see Paris.

He was going to be charged with dozens of crimes, including bank robberies, the murder of the criminal found near Versailles (which he denied) and the attempted murder of a policeman. Other charges would probably follow. He was told that he had been sentenced in his absence, some years earlier, to two years' imprisonment for the cheque offences he had committed while tenant of the inn at Vieux-Moulin. To the amazement of the police he said that he wanted to plead not guilty to the offences. They pointed out that with the sort of sentences he was going to get for his bank robberies, two more years wouldn't make much difference. Mesrine however insisted. His trial was fixed for 6 June.

Madame Mesrine, still loyal to her wayward son, visited him in prison. He asked her to give a party for Sabrina's twelfth birthday on 6 June. Her birthday was really on 7 June, but it would help to take their minds off his trial, he said. And while

he was in court, it would cheer him up to think of them having fun. His mother agreed to hold the party and even agreed to invite Jocelyne, although she made it clear that she did not like her. Madame Mesrine had made great efforts to be friendly to Jacques's women. The pregnant black girl and the second wife, Soledad, she had welcomed. Even the less glamorous Jeanne Schneider, she had tried to like, not to mention the dozens of others Jacques had brought home over the years. Her tolerance had at last come to an end. Jocelyne later complained of Madame Mesrine's unfriendliness, although she continued to entertain Jocelyne, and even answered the letters she wrote from prison.

Mesrine wanted Jocelyne to have an alibi for the time of his escape. He communicated to his friends the date and time of his trial. And he thanked God that he had had the foresight to plan his escape before he had been arrested.

He was taken by train from the Gare du Nord in Paris to Compiègne. The journey started at 9.40 a.m. and lasted an hour. Several armed guards and Mesrine occupied a reserved carriage. After about twenty minutes Mesrine told the Chief Prison Officer escorting him that he needed to go to the lavatory. 'The Director told you that I've been having attacks of dysentery,' he lied. The lavatory at the end of the carriage was searched before Mesrine was taken there. One of his wrists remained handcuffed to an armed guard. Twice again during the journey Mesrine demanded to go to the lavatory, complaining of his terrible stomach pains. The guards by now believed that he really was unwell.

At the railway station in Compiègne Mesrine was given an additional escort of local policemen. As he was being bundled into a police van in the station forecourt, he caught sight of his accomplice. The man threw his cigarette to the ground. That was the agreed signal. Everything was ready.

Mesrine was taken to the police station and put into a cell. It was about eleven o'clock. His case was going to be heard at two o'clock. There was no provision for any lunch for him, and no one in the police station thought to give him any. Jacques later said he was touched when, at one o'clock, the door of his cell opened, and the policeman in charge of the escort who had come with him from Paris handed him a sandwich, which Mesrine knew he must have bought with his own money. During the remaining time in the cell, Mesrine maintained the fiction of his dysentery and asked to be taken to the lavatory frequently.

The time came for Mesrine to be taken to the Palais de Justice.

On the drive he made conversation with his guards, trying gradually to relax them, to establish a friendly atmosphere. He knew that if he could reduce the hostility his warders felt towards him, they might begin to forget that he was a dangerous criminal and a seasoned escaper. All his life Mesrine had been able to wheedle his way round people. He could very quickly assess a person's way of thinking and adapt to it. He realized that people are always delighted to feel that they have made a friend, and he was able to put them at ease with an air of relaxed familiarity. Whoever he was talking to would end up conversing with him on a more friendly basis than they would have expected. Mesrine's genius lay in knowing exactly when to stop. He never upset people by seeming to be over-familiar, or by forcing himself upon them. Having established a friendship, he would delicately retract, so that the other person was left wanting to develop the relationship and recapture the moments of friendly intimacy. It was an effective technique.

Before they reached the court the van was echoing with laughter. Mesrine was playing the carefree rogue. But underneath, his mind was working like a computer, running over his plan, trying to anticipate all difficulties, his pulse racing. He would shortly be free or probably dead. The van pulled into the courtyard of the Palais de Justice. Through the wire-crossed window of the armoured van he could see his accomplice at the wheel of a white Alfa Romeo, in the street outside the court.

Inside the Palais Mesrine was made to sit outside the court on a bench reserved for accused prisoners. An armed guard was still handcuffed to him. His lawyer came over to him and they exchanged a few words. Mesrine continued to complain of terrible stomach-ache. He asked to be taken to the lavatory again and was led to the public lavatories in the courtyard outside. A guard checked that nothing had been hidden in the lavatories, then allowed Mesrine to go in. Still handcuffed to another guard, Mesrine went into the first cubicle, but immediately turned round and said plaintively, 'There's no paper.' The warder could see that he was right, and led him into the second cubicle. This time Mesrine flew into a rage. 'There's no paper there either, and look, it's filthy. Take me back into court.'

The warder kindly offered to take Mesrine to the lawyers' lavatory inside the building. He could see that Mesrine was getting angry, and he didn't want him to turn violent. Besides which, the man did have dysentery. It was preferable that he

went to the lavatory before rather than during the trial. Mesrine was taken up to the first floor and shown into the cubicle. Although his hands were still handcuffed, he managed to reach the 9 mm. Luger hidden behind the cistern without arousing the suspicion of the guard. He wedged the gun securely into his belt, noisily screwed up some paper, and pulled the chain. Michel had done his work well. Mesrine had discovered during his preliminary reconnaissance trip to Compiègne that it was possible for a member of the public to get into the lawyers' toilets. He had known that it would be pointless to hide a gun in the outside lavatory. It was far more likely to be searched, but he thought that if he could make sure that he would be taken upstairs, the guards would not bother to check for anything hidden there. So far the plan had worked.

Mesrine and the guard returned to the prisoners' bench and sat quietly, waiting for his case to be called. M. Tisserand, the owner of the inn, arrived at the court to testify against Mesrine. It was almost time. At last M. Schryve, the court usher, called his name. Mesrine asked the guards to unlock his handcuffs before he went up to answer the charges. They refused and led him forward. The judge, M. Guérin, was a greying, benevolent-looking man. It was his first session on the bench in Compiègne. He began to read the charges in a low voice. 'You have drawn cheques to the value of 4000 francs without provision. You also stand accused . . .' Mesrine sprang forward, grabbing hold of him, dragging with him the guard, to whom he was still handcuffed. 'Get down, or I'll kill the judge,' he snarled at the court. He meant business, and everyone lay on the ground. He was holding the Luger in his right hand, pointed at the magistrate's head. Mesrine ordered the guard to unlock the handcuffs. He obeyed without a murmur. Using the judge as a human shield Mesrine made for the door of the court, edging round some of the bodies prostrate on the floor. As he reached the door, he fired two shots into the courtroom to discourage anyone from following him. A bullet drove deeply into the chair of Madame Antoine, the Deputy Procurator, missing her by inches.

Mesrine quickly reached the courtyard of the Palais de Justice, where several police cars were parked. He tightened his hold round M. Guérin's neck, and made a dash across the yard. A policeman fired in his direction, hoping to distract him. It was impossible to do more. The risk that a police bullet might hit the judge was too great. As Mesrine reached the gates of the

Palais he hurled his hostage away from him, and ran as fast as he could towards the get-away car, parked a hundred yards away. As he ran he felt a bullet crash into his right arm. He kept running. Shot after shot rang out in the usually quiet street. The door of the Alfa Romeo swung open. The engine was running. Mesrine collapsed into the seat beside the driver, his lungs bursting for air, and the car moved off. At the same moment a police van drove across their path. But Mesrine's accomplice was an excellent driver. He backed, accelerated and swerved round the van, before the police-driver realized what had happened. As the van drew alongside them again, Mesrine fired three shots through his window at the driver, who slumped over the wheel. Following the route he had devised months ago, Mesrine was quickly driven out of Compiègne.

Within fifteen minutes there were roadblocks on all the routes out of town. Twenty police cars searched the roads through the forest of Compiègne and a helicopter hovered overhead. It was no use. Mesrine and his driver seemed to have dissolved into thin air.

They were driving along minor roads and travelling very fast. At Meaux, twenty miles away, they changed cars. They stole a red Alfa Romeo with black stripes round the body, to cover the ten miles or so to the farm where Mesrine intended to hide.

The driver had arranged with one of Mesrine's friends who owned an isolated house in Seine-et-Marne that they should drive there from Compiègne. Knowing that it was possible that either of them might be wounded during the escape, there were first-aid supplies ready. As the red Alfa Romeo drew up at the house, the friend rushed out and helped Mesrine in. Another friend immediately got into the Alfa and drove it thirty or forty miles away, where it was abandoned. Jacques was given a local anaesthetic, and the bullet was extracted from his arm. By 3.30 his host was opening a bottle of champagne to celebrate the safe conclusion of the escape.

In Madame Mesrine's kitchen Jocelyne had been helping to prepare food for Sabrina's party when the pop music on the radio was interrupted by a news-flash about the escape of the dangerous gangster from the courtroom. Less than two hours later Mesrine telephoned the flat and talked to Jocelyne and his parents. He told his girl-friend that she would be able to join

him, but not for a fortnight or so. In the meantime she should go out a lot, he said. He knew that the police would keep her under close surveillance, hoping that she might lead them to him. He wanted them to deduce that he was not going to contact her. He had only just finished speaking when the police arrived at his parents' flat.

Mesrine decided to remain for about a week in his first hide-out, while his friends organized false tip-offs for the police. He spent his first evening of liberty drinking and talking to the trusted friends who were with him. The effects of the champagne and the local anaesthetic might have been expected to make him sleepy. But, according to a young man who was with him that night, he was euphoric. For hours he talked, planning wild crimes and fantasizing about tricks he could play on the police. He seemed more certain than ever that he could do anything. He talked frequently about his affection and gratitude to the friend who had driven the get-away car. Loyalty to his friends was one of the characteristics Mesrine always most admired, and he knew that his friend had risked his life to help him. However, the real reason for Mesrine's good humour that evening was not so much his liberty as the fact that he had kept his word to the policeman in Versailles. He had escaped within three months, as he had said he would. He had worried that it would take more than three months for his case to come up. But he had been lucky. And that evening he seemed to become obsessed with the fact that he had kept the vow he had made so casually to the Commissaire. Mesrine's main interest, even in his own destiny, seemed to be theatrical. He had been arrested on 8 March, and the date of his escape was 6 June. He had only had two days to go, but he had done it.

9

Mesrine's arm healed rapidly and within a week he was back at work, robbing a factory in Paris of thirty million francs. He arranged several hideouts for himself, both in Paris and outside the city. One of the flats was in the lovely old town of Meaux, thirty miles from Paris; another was a cottage near Caen in Normandy. He changed his appearance radically,

growing a beard and cutting his hair very short. Despite the confidence born of his successful escape, Mesrine took every possible precaution to ensure that he remained free.

During June and July 1973 he befriended several people whom he liked, trusted and worked with; but he did not reveal his true identity. He made no attempt to see his mother or Sabrina, knowing that the police would be keeping a close watch on them. He intended to arrange for Jocelyne to rejoin him, but it was necessary to wait a week or two. He badly wanted to arrange a meeting with his father, whom he knew was still seriously ill, but he did not dare to telephone his parents' flat. He knew that the line would be tapped and he did not want to risk the police accusing his family of helping him while he was on the run. So he sent a friend to his father's factory to talk to him there and attempt to arrange a meeting. The friend returned, grim-faced, to tell Mesrine that his father was now in hospital. He had made inquiries and knew the hospital and room number. He understood Jacques's devotion to his father and offered to go and visit him for Jacques. Mesrine refused to accept such a suggestion. Although he knew that the police would be watching the hospital he insisted on going himself.

The next day Jacques was driven to the hospital, out of visiting hours, by two friends. He was armed and so were his escorts. They were to wait in the car, ready to drive off at top speed if Mesrine should rush out of the hospital pursued by the police. They parked, keeping their eyes fixed on the doors of the hospital as Mesrine strode in. He was wearing a white overall, glasses and carried a sheaf of papers. Round his neck hung a stethoscope. Inside the hospital no one stopped him or questioned him, although two policemen were sitting in the hall. It was easy to find his father's room. Slowly Jacques opened the door, apprehensive that there might be a policeman sitting in the room. The room was empty except for the old man lying very still in the bed. He looked for a minute at the figure standing in the doorway, as if he knew the face, but was unable to place it. Then he realized. 'You?' he asked, hardly daring to hope that it could be the son he worried about constantly. Mesrine quietly shut the door behind him and nodded, indicating to his father to speak softly. He went over to the bed and embraced his father, horrified to see how thin he had become. (He had lost about four stone since Jacques last saw him.) He was obviously dying. But to his son's delight

he retained the old defiant look in his eyes. 'You shouldn't have come.' 'I had to, for my own sake.'

In front of his father Jacques later said that he felt like a child again, a naughty boy with an infinitely kind and patient father. A child who knew that his adored father, the only real hero he had ever had, was dying. He confessed later that at that moment he would willingly have given his own life if it could have meant that his 'papa' would live. 'Thank you for coming. I understand. But now you must go. Take care of yourself, whatever happens.' The old man and the most wanted gangster in France hugged each other, each knowing that they would never meet again. 'Adieu, Papa.' 'Oui, adieu, mon petit.' Jacques walked out of the room, swallowing back tears as he made his way without looking back to the front entrance of the hospital. He climbed quickly into the back seat of the waiting car, and they drove off, apparently unnoticed.

The plans for Jocelyne to rejoin him went ahead. She was still being constantly followed by the police, but after a fortnight of intensive surveillance they began to get slack. Jocelyne was given her instructions by an intermediary, one of the close friends willing to carry out errands for Jacques. She did exactly as she was told, playing her part with cool efficiency. One afternoon she slipped out of the flat where she was staying, unobserved by the policemen on duty. On the other side of the street she hailed a taxi. Within a few minutes she realized that they were being followed. She leaned forward and appealed to the driver. She told him that she was a stranger to Paris, and that she was being pestered by an unpleasant man. The driver checked his mirror and confirmed that they were being followed. 'Hang on!' he said, as he accelerated and swerved into a back street, then down another. They lost their pursuers within a couple of minutes and drove to the address Jocelyne had been told to go to. The taxi driver was rewarded for his kindness with one of Jocelyne's angelic smiles and a very large tip. She walked quickly into the building and straight out through the back door, where a car was waiting for her. She was told to lie down on the back seat as the car drew away.

It was three days later that the police realized that Jocelyne had given them the slip. They hastily searched the flat where she had been living but found no clues to her whereabouts. Now that Jocelyne and Jacques were reunited, she was once again

forbidden to speak in public places in case her accent gave them away. They kept on the move, becoming familiar to their neighbours at each of their hideouts. It was by now July. Huge numbers of Parisians were preparing to leave the city for the month of August. Mesrine decided that he too would like to spend the summer near the sea, so he rented a small apartment in Trouville, the Normandy resort nestling next to the more fashionable Deauville. It was typical of Mesrine that he chose to take a flat a stone's throw from the local police headquarters.

The nearby restaurant, on the corner of the rue des Bains, was a favourite with the police, and Mesrine would often have a drink or a meal with them. One officer became a particular friend, and would spend hours with the 'businessman' who had come to live in the little coastal town. He assured Mesrine that if ever he needed any help, he should not be embarrassed to ask. Just as in Caracas, where his closest friend among the locals had been a senior police officer, so now Mesrine took care to cultivate the friendship of the amiable policeman. Although professionally the police were his enemies, Jacques's affection for these two men was genuine. He was also used to hiding the truth, in varying degrees, from his friends. The practical advantages for a man in his position of befriending the local police force, were obvious. They would be far less likely to suspect a man they knew socially, of being on the run. But, in Jacques's eyes, this did not in any way invalidate the personal relationship he had with them.

He was delighted one day when his friend in the Trouville police force, who was telling him about the dangers and difficulties of a policeman's life, mentioned the name of Jacques Mesrine. Seeing that the businessman was interested, the policeman showed him the photograph of France's most wanted criminal, remarking that you could tell by the look of the fellow that he was a dangerous character.

Certain friends and accomplices of Mesrine came to visit him in Deauville. Together they would bathe, or lie on the beach in the sun, reading and talking. They often went to the races in Deauville. In his youth Mesrine had lost a lot of money gambling on horses. But for some reason, now that he gambled daily with his life, his luck on the racecourse seemed to have changed. His eye for a good animal, for a horse that was about to perform well, became exceptionally good. Although he did not know a great deal about horses, he despised irrational

or superstitious betting – betting on a name or the colours, and his decisions about which horse to back were always based on reason, on assessing the form.

He also often took Jocelyne to the casinos in Trouville and Deauville where they won at baccarat. They were by now unrecognizable to anyone who was looking for them on the basis of old photographs. Mesrine had a thick beard. He had also changed his style of dressing. He no longer wore beautifully cut Italian suits or jackets that had led the French press to describe him as the country's best-dressed ciminal. He now wore blue jeans, a T-shirt and training shoes most of the time. He would still, however, enjoy dressing up to go racing or to go to the casino. Jocelyne's appearance had been changed as well: Mesrine had helped her to dye her long brown hair blonde.

The summer was idyllic. Jocelyne and Jacques lived like carefree holiday-makers. Jacques bought a moped, and would take Jocelyne for drives into the Normandy countryside that he had known so well ever since he was a child. He showed her Rouen, the ancient capital of the Duchy of Normandy, with its little narrow streets which had miraculously survived the bombing of the Second World War. He took her to the place du Vieux Marché, and showed her the tablet marking the spot where Joan of Arc had been burnt. They went to the apple orchards in the early morning, the white mist hanging over them with its promise of a beautiful day. He showed her endless sleepy villages and bustling towns – Bayeux, Avranches, La Bouille, Fécamp. The food in Normandy is some of the best in France, and Mesrine took great delight in taking Jocelyne and any other friends who happened to be with them to the best restaurant for each speciality. Jacques enjoyed walking, and they would stroll for miles along the wide, pale Normandy beaches, some deserted, some alive with scuttling children and beach parasols, like huge poisonous mushrooms. In the evening they would wander through the streets of Trouville, looking at the little harbour with the boats rocking gently on the dark water.

Yet despite their happiness in being together, and Jacques's great love for Normandy, they were not entirely carefree. The strain of life on the run in a foreign country was beginning to tell on Jocelyne. She was homesick: she had never before been away from her parents for any length of time. She cele-

brated her twenty-first birthday in August, without any word of congratulation from her family. It was well-known in Canada that she was living with Mesrine. Her family could not write to her. Jocelyne was eager to persuade Jacques to return with her to Canada and there live under an assumed name and not by crime. She had hoped that they would be able to open a small restaurant and marry.

But a problem had arisen for Jacques that he had always known would face him sooner or later. Janou – Jeanne Schneider. She had been released from prison in Canada, extradicted to France, and was now in prison awaiting trial for the armed robbery of the Tunisian businessman, Albert Setruk, in a hotel at Chamonix in 1967. She was being held in the women's wing of Fleury-Mérogis, the prison in which Jocelyne had spent two months, earlier in the year. Jacques had always sworn that Janou was the most important person in his life and he now realized that she was.

There is a conflict in the accounts given by Jacques and Jocelyne of their relationship. He said later that he had always told Jocelyne that when Jeanne Schneider was released from prison he would want to live with her again. And that when he learnt that Jeanne had returned to France, he virtually forced Jocelyne to go back to Canada. Jocelyne's version of the story is that she decided to return home because she was unhappy in France, and that Mesrine was badly torn between the two women. His letters to Jocelyne suggest that he was certainly intending to live with her again, although it is unlikely that he would ever have settled in Canada. Most of his friends emphasize that after his return from Venezuela he was determined to remain in France, or at least in Europe.

Mesrine's love for Jocelyne was straightforward. She was pretty, charming and young. She had an attractive foreign accent. And she was star-struck by the idea of gangsters. His involvement with Janou was rather different. Photographs show a long-faced, almost plain woman, invariably wearing thick spectacles. She was not young, and had worked as a prostitute, but Mesrine respected her. He sensed a similarity between them. Both were willing to break the rules of society, both had suffered during their lives and both were unsentimental about the idea of inflicting suffering on others. He committed himself to Janou in a way that he had not done to either of his wives or to any of his other mistresses. And although he adored

Jocelyne, he could not, he felt, simply overlook his pledge to that whatever happened she would remain the most important woman for him.

Mesrine needed money, and at the beginning of September they returned to Paris. It was agreed that Jocelyne should go back to Montreal, and Mesrine managed to get word to Jeanne in prison that if she wanted to be 'sprung' he would arrange it. For Jocelyne, Jacques procured two sets of false papers. She was to cross to England on the channel ferry using the first set, and then fly to Canada using the second. When she arrived in Montreal, she was to hide under a false name for a while, until she discovered whether the police were intending to arrest her for helping Jacques while he was on the run in Canada. He told her that she was not even to contact her parents directly, but to arrange a meeting with them through a trusted friend at an arranged rendezvous. Since she did not speak English and was unused to travelling alone, Jacques arranged for one of his closest friends to escort her to England and put her on the plane to Canada.

At about midday on the day of Jocelyne's departure, the friend who was to travel with her arrived, ashen-faced. Without any preamble he broke the news to Mesrine: 'Your father is dead.' He knew that there was nothing he could say to prepare Jacques, and nothing he could say to comfort him. Old M. Mesrine had been released from hospital and had died at home, in his own armchair. He had not died of the cancer that had been slowly destroying him for so long, but of a heart attack. Mesrine just wanted to be alone. Quietly but firmly he rebuffed Jocelyne's attempts to comfort him, and told her to leave. They said goodbye and she left Mesrine to recover from the greatest sorrow of his life. His father had been in many ways the key figure in his life. As a lonely evacuee child, in the country and away from his parents, he had dreamed endlessly about the father he could hardly remember. Later he had been desperately saddened because his father seemed never to have enough time to spend with him, and later still the only regret Jacques had had when he was repeatedly expelled from schools and sacked from jobs was that his father would be disappointed in him. During his adult life his devotion to his father had grown still more. Although he had expected a lot from Jacques as a boy, once he was grown up he never reproached him with his behaviour at all. He seemed always to understand his son, and

always, whatever he did, to feel a certain pride in Jacques, for what he could have been rather than what he was.

Mme Mesrine on the other hand was always shocked that her talented and handsome son should have become a criminal. She disapproved of his marrying twice and abandoning both his wives. And although she remained extraordinarily loyal to him to the end, she was a forthright, outspoken woman and saw no justification for failing to criticize her wayward son. For Jacques, this attitude was easier to cope with than his father's apparently infinite gentle tolerance.

It was in a sense only with the death of his father that Jacques realized that he was an adult himself. Until then his life had been an unbroken series of misdeeds for which he was punished, and sometimes escaped punishment. But whatever he did, he knew that his father would always forgive him and continue to love him, even though they saw little of each other. And to his father he would never seem a hopeless case, a hardened criminal, but always just a bad boy who might be better in future. Now there was no completely good, completely reliable person for him to turn to. With his women he had to be strong. And he knew that none of them felt for him the disinterested devotion of his father. His mother loved him, but was critical. Curiously it was his daughter, twelve-year-old Sabrina, who could most nearly fulfil his father's role in Mesrine's life. He knew that she was deeply devoted to him, and that for her he could do no wrong. But she was still a child, and her attitude towards him might change. He considered it too dangerous to attempt to see her now, knowing that since Jocelyne had given them the slip the police had increased their watch on the Mesrine family. Because of this, the family were unable to contact him at all. It was in a sense fortunate for Mesrine that he did not hear of his father's death for a month. He would almost certainly have insisted on going to the funeral. And the Paris police had not neglected to surround the graveyard with unmarked cars. The cemetery was swarming with policemen, hidden behind almost every tombstone. For three days after he heard the news, Jacques saw no one. Alone in one of his Paris flats he began to readjust himself to living in a world without his father.

On the third day a friend came to see him, to encourage him to return to Trouville. Mesrine realized that he would have to pull himself together. The period of mourning was over, and he

went back to the coastal town. On the way he remembered an attractive barmaid he had met there, a girl called Francine. As soon as he reached Trouville he drove over to see her, and when he returned to Paris four days later she followed him. They went to one of Mesrine's rented flats, in the rue Vergniaud in the 13th *arrondissement*. It was hardly a serious affair, since Mesrine had just sent Jocelyne back to Canada, and was waiting to release Janou from jail; but he felt in need of distraction, and Francine was just that.

The answer from Janou came back from Fleury-Mérogis, through one of Mesrine's emissaries, that Janou did not want to be helped to escape from prison. She had experienced life on the run, and she knew that for Jacques things were even hotter now than they had been when she was with him. She now wanted only a quiet life; she decided to do her time quietly. It was not yet clear how long she would be sentenced to for the 1967 hold-up, but she knew that an attempted escape could only make matters worse.

Mesrine continued to work. During the summer, while he had been based in Trouville, he had returned several times to Paris to carry out robberies, occasionally using his tactic of the 'double robbery', going straight from the scene of one crime to the next. He also began to plan his next big coup: he would again attack two different targets during a single outing.

He intended to work with Michel Hardouin, a trusted accomplice. Like Mesrine, Michel came from a comfortable middle-class background and had been educated at expensive private schools. He was younger than Mesrine, only thirty, but Jacques had great respect for his intelligence and strength. He was a giant of a man, 1 m. 90 tall and weighing 110 kg. He shared Mesrine's fascination with fire-arms, and never went out without three loaded revolvers. They used to meet in a smart café in the Champs Elysées where, over an *orange pressée* or a cocktail, they would go over the plan in painstaking detail. This degree of care was not unusual for Mesrine when planning a robbery: one of the reasons for his success was that he always tried to discover what could possibly go wrong with his schemes.

But despite stringent precautions, an informer tipped off the police that a crime was being plotted in that particular café. The Paris police have always claimed that their informant was a customer in the café who had overheard snippets of the

conversation between Jacques and Michel and realized what they were up to. In view of Mesrine's obsession with security, this is unlikely. He never allowed any of his 'men' to refer to any bank or other organization that they were intending to rob by its proper name. Their private language with its many codewords and innocent-sounding synonyms had the great advantage over the traditional *argot* of the underworld of sounding completely unsuspicious. Jacques had stayed free for so long because he did not take risks. He was far too skilled in the techniques of the undercover agent, which are the same whether a man is undercover for political or for criminal reasons, to be overheard discussing a crime. It seems certain that there was a leak from inside Mesrine's circle, although it has never become clear who it was who betrayed Mesrine. Since the police were told only that the two men met in the café, the informant was probably someone who did not know the addresses of any of Mesrine's hideouts. It is also unlikely that the informant knew the true identity of Mesrine, unless the tip-off was given in such a way as to divert suspicion from the source. If the police had had any idea that their tip-off concerned the most wanted man in France they would have moved rather more quickly and more violently. As it was, they kept a watch on the café and after a few days managed to follow the supposed criminals to an address in the rue Vergniaud. They then mounted watch on the flat, using local police patrols, although they still did not know whom they were watching or whether the suspects were really involved in crime at all.

The flat on the second floor in the rue Vergniaud was extremely comfortable. The building had recently been renovated, and the first tenants had moved in four months previously in May. There was a marble hall with soft lighting and attractive arrangements of flowers tended daily, and deep carpets leading to the flats. At the far end of the hall there were rows of new mail-boxes. One of the boxes, on the lowest row, bore the name Lefèvre, and the direction 'Door T, 2nd floor'. In this building Mesrine was living as M. Lefèvre, under which name he had identity papers and a driving licence.

The day before the double crime was to be committed Michel suggested that a friend of his, a professional criminal, who happened to be very hard up, should be allowed to join them in the robberies. Mesrine was reluctant to agree. He said that he would be happy to lend the man some money, but that it

would be foolish to take someone he had never met on a raid with him. Michel tried to persuade Jacques, stressing the professionalism of his friend. Finally Jacques agreed and suggested that it might also be a good opportunity to try out another young man who had shown himself eager to work with Mesrine. He was Pierre Verheyden, whom Mesrine had met in Trouville. He was thirty-two and as yet had no criminal record. Mesrine had considered buying a bar in the Deauville/Trouville district, and was thinking of installing Verheyden as the manager. Pierre seemed younger than he was, and with his neat, page-boy hair-cut looked more like a Florentine angel than a crook. He looked rather innocent and Mesrine was aware that it could work to his advantage. Pierre had begged Mesrine to let him take part in a hold-up and now, finally, Jacques decided to try him out. That same evening he telephoned the younger man, and told him to come to Paris. He knew that by inviting Verheyden to join in the robberies he was really just making him a present of a share in the proceeds. But he was sure that they would take a lot of money from the two banks, and he liked Pierre and was happy to do him a good turn. And, if he was to manage the bar for him, it would be no bad thing for him to have been involved in some illegal activity with Jacques. Mesrine knew that Pierre would probably be more loyal and pliable if he knew that he was incriminated along with his employer.

Later that evening he met Verheyden at the Porte d'Auteuil, in the south-west corner of Paris, on the outskirts of the Bois de Boulogne. He told Pierre to park his car there, and he drove him to the flat, where he was to spend the night. Mesrine had some reservations about allowing him to come to the flat in the rue Vergniaud, which was by now his main hideout. But he decided that if Pierre was not told the exact address, the risk would not be very great. And he believed that Verheyden was honest and would not betray him. Even so, he took care not to drive straight to the flat by a route that the other man might remember. It was most unusual for Jacques to have agreed to work with two new men, and even more unlike him to allow Verheyden to sleep in his flat. But although neither Verheyden nor Pierre Tebirent, Michel's criminal friend, knew the real name of 'M. Lefèvre', the usual security precautions were perhaps not as tight as they should have been.

The next day, 27 September, was a Thursday. After a

leisurely breakfast the four men set out for work. It had been agreed that Verheyden should be the chauffeur. His role was simply to drive the other three to the scenes of their crimes, and sit outside in the car, waiting for them, ready to drive away at speed as soon as they came running out of the banks. They drove north-west through Paris, towards the avenue des Villiers, where the first bank was situated. Verheyden drove the white Renault 16 quickly and confidently. The atmosphere in the car was tense. The robberies would probably not be complicated, and the three men who were going to enter the banks were old pros. But there is an emotion akin to stage-fright that even an experienced criminal feels just before a big hold-up. It *is* somewhat like acting: when the actor no longer feels a *frisson* of fear at the risk of falling, his performance deteriorates, his work becomes glib. The criminal's work becomes careless.

The car drew up outside the B.N.P. bank at 97, avenue des Villiers. It was 11.25 a.m. as Jacques Mesrine, Michel Hardouin and Pierre Tebirent walked into the building. The manager, M. Hadida, was in his office. He was just dialling a telephone number when, behind him, the door opened. 'Put the phone down and stand up,' said a slow voice. He stood up and turned round, and found himself staring into the barrel of a revolver. Behind the gun stood Mesrine wearing a black wig. 'Follow me,' he said, leading Hadida back into the main hall of the bank. There, the manager saw, to his horror, that two other gangsters had already taken charge. Tebirent was guarding the entrances, while Michel was making jokes and playfully teasing the eight bank employees and two customers whom he was holding at gun-point. 'Don't worry, little kittens, it isn't your money that we're borrowing. And no one would hurt you, you're too pretty.' Mesrine opened the three smaller safes and removed the cash and negotiable bonds that were in them.

The manager remarked later that Mesrine had seemed nervous, that his hand had been shaking and that he had talked so fast that at times he hadn't been able to understand what he was saying. He ordered M. Hadida to open the largest safe. The manager refused, saying that he did not have the key. Mesrine rammed the gun into his stomach, but still Hadida insisted that he did not have the key. Mesrine did not pursue the matter. He admitted later that he had had terrible misgivings that morning, an intuition that something was going to go wrong. He picked up a metal box that was lying in the big safe. 'Right,

let's go.' He looked menacingly at M. Hadida, 'No alarm, no police. Understood? Or we'll be back.' It was 11.30 as the men left the bank. The manager ran to the door after them, and saw them pile into a Renault 16 and drive off. He ran up to a guard who was stationed outside a nearby ambassador's residence and got him to alert the police instantly by radio. The guard managed to take the number of the car and relayed it to police headquarters.

The first robbery had gone quite well, despite Mesrine's apprehensions. The avenue des Villiers branch of the B.N.P. was one of the oldest banks in Paris. No one had successfully robbed it for fifteen years. Mesrine was very pleased by the way Pierre Tebirent had proved himself. He had behaved sensibly and efficiently, exactly like the professional Michel had described. The only disappointment was that the proceeds were not very large. They had taken only 44,000 francs in notes and about 100,000 francs worth of bonds. However, Jacques was cheered by the success of the first raid, and, giving Verheyden directions for the second bank, hoped that it would prove to be more profitable. At the bottom of the avenue des Villiers the car turned across the place Prosper-Goubaux into the boulevard des Batignolles. They were heading eastwards, anxious not to waste any time. The sooner the next raid was safely over, the sooner they would all be able to relax. They began to discuss where they might have lunch.

Twenty minutes later a police patrol car was driving idly down the boulevard des Barbes, keeping an eye out for trouble but not really expecting to find any. Over the police radio a voice announced that all cars should keep a look-out for a white R16, registration number 9047 RE 77, the getaway car used in a raid a few minutes previously at a branch of the B.N.P. Automatically the driver looked about him, rapidly dismissing, one by one, every vehicle he could see. Just ahead of him, at the junction with the rue Labat, there was a slight traffic jam, caused by some road-works. And there, double-parked, was the white R16. He checked the number – it was definitely the same car. With the officer on patrol with him he got out and went over to the parked car. The driver was sitting at the wheel, apparently quite calm.

The policeman addressed him courteously as 'Monsieur' and explained that he thought the car had a puncture in one of the rear tyres. Pierre Verheyden was fooled. He got out of the

car to have a look and was immediately apprehended by the two policemen. Ten yards away, the other three criminals were just leaving the Banque de l'Union Parisienne. Michel was at the door when he shouted back to the other two, 'The *flics* are already here!' The three men ran out of the bank towards their car, hoping that they would be able to distract the policemen and free Pierre Verheyden. But the manager of the bank had rushed to the door after them, and was screaming 'Thieves, thieves!' as loudly as he could, pointing in their direction. One of the policemen ran after them, leaving the other with Verheyden. Michel stopped a Fiat at the first crossroads they came to, and ordered the driver, at gunpoint, to get out. The other two leapt into the car, and under fire from the policeman who had pursued them, they drove off. Pierre Tebirent was struck on the cheek by a bullet, but was not seriously hurt. A few streets away they abandoned the car outside a garage. The garage-owner was surprised to see three men walk away from a car with a shattered windscreen and bullet marks on the bodywork, but since they seemed so calm and businesslike, he decided that they must be plain-clothes policemen. Pierre, Michel and Jacques split up.

Jacques returned to the rue Vergniaud, deeply upset. He felt responsible for the men who worked for him. Never before, in over fifteen years of serious crime, had one of his accomplices been arrested. The second robbery had yielded only 10,000 francs, and the cash from the first had been lost with the Renault. The only comfort was that Verheyden was a beginner, and would not be charged with a string of offences in the way that Mesrine himself could have been. He did not know enough to do any damage if he 'talked', and anyway Mesrine assumed that he would not. As soon as he arrived back in the flat, Mesrine telephoned some friends of his, to arrange a lawyer for Pierre. It was important that he should have a lawyer who was not used by professional criminals, or the court might assume that he was an experienced criminal.

Francine came round to the flat to visit Mesrine. She had no idea of the drama in which Mesrine had participated since she saw him last. She brought some food with her, and Mesrine cooked dinner for them both. He was still disappointed by the day's events, but he was already beginning to turn over in his mind schemes for possible new crimes. He seemed a little distracted, Francine noticed, but as affectionate as ever.

In the police headquarters on the Quai des Orfèvres Pierre Verheyden was trying to save his skin. He was telling the police as much as he could, and was co-operating with them in attempting to identify the men he had worked with. Throughout Thursday afternoon and evening he was questioned. He was shown photographs of the bank-robbery experts known to work in Paris. If he did not recognize anyone in that file, there were further sets of photographs of provincial bank robbers, and foreigners who had sometimes worked in France. But it did not take long for Verheyden to find a face he knew among the photographs. The police were astonished and delighted when Pierre announced that, although he had now grown a beard the man who had organized the hold-ups was Jacques Mesrine.

Throughout the night he was driven around Paris as the police tried to jog his memory, to get him to recognize some landmark that would enable them to locate the flat. Then they had a stroke of luck. Pierre remembered that he had driven past the Porte d'Orléans the night before. After that the policemen who were escorting him scoured the area, trying to find the road in which Mesrine's flat was. He was sure that he would be able to recognize it. During the night it had been very difficult to see the streets he was being driven along properly. Now, as the dawn was beginning to come up, cold, hunger and exhaustion were about to put an end to the search. Neither Pierre nor his police guards could keep going much longer. They swung northwards, up the rue Vergniaud, heading back towards the police headquarters. Suddenly Verheyden realized that this was the street he had stayed in. He managed without any difficulty to point out to the police the block in which Mesrine was living. The police officers with him were euphoric. They radioed the news back to headquarters, and drove back to the apartment block as quickly as they could. The police were understandably satisfied with their night's work

Later, when the police realized that they had already been watching Mesrine's flat, they were furious with themselves for not taking the tip-off more seriously. The surveillance of the flat had been casual, and there was no exact record of comings-and-goings there in the last forty-eight hours. Verheyden knew that he would now be treated with leniency. He also knew that he had betrayed Mesrine to imprisonment for life, or to the guillotine if there was any truth in his boasted thirty-

nine murders. It was about ten o'clock when the hard-working policemen and the traitor sat down to their breakfast of steaming hot coffee and soft, fresh bread and jam.

Upstairs, the Brigade de Recherche et d'Intervention, otherwise known as the 'anti-gangs' was moving into action. They had been told that Mesrine was a killer, and they knew that he was an experienced escaper. They were not going to take any chances this time. The 'anti gangs' was well known as the crack division of the police force. It included the most highly-trained team of sharpshooters ever assembled in a European Police force, and some of the best brains in the Police. It had had a very high success rate but a reputation for being trigger-happy.

From the central radio-room under the eaves of the police headquarters, an urgent message went out to all the unmarked police vehicles. All were summoned back to H.Q. for new instructions. Within minutes the drivers began to assemble and were sent out again, one by one heading for the rue Vergniaud. The first were already in position when the last ones were arriving on the Quai des Orfèvres to be given their orders. The vehicles included a greengrocer's van, a removal van, a saloon car with a young woman at the wheel, a motor-bike ridden by a scruffy youth (wearing black leathers) and a dust-cart. In the rue Vergniaud they came and went that morning, unnoticed by everyone except an elderly bedridden lady who spent her days watching the activity in the road. She telephoned the police three times during the day to tell them that she thought something suspicious was going on, and that she would feel happier if she knew there was a policeman or two around.

By the middle of the afternoon there were in fact fifty in the area. As well as the unmarked vehicles, there were about a dozen plain-clothes men and women observing everyone who came out of or went into no. 84. The observers were disguised as road-sweepers, tramps and housewives. Dozens of 'anti-gangs', not in uniform, were in position in nearby buildings. It was vital that any of Mesrine's associates who were about should not be frightened off by the sight of *képis*. The police had as yet no way of knowing whether or not Mesrine was in the flat. As the afternoon wore on and still there was no sign of movement from the flat, the police began, very slowly, to move in. They approached the *concierge*, who thought that the tenant of the second-floor flat was in, but could not

swear to it. They ascertained that none of Mesrine's windows overlooked the street. This gave them much greater freedom, and immediately uniformed police reinforcements were drafted in. Permission was obtained from the owners of other flats in the building to position men in their halls. But still all they could do was to wait. If Mesrine was in the flat he could not get out past them. If he was not there it was quite possible that one of his friends was. And if they rushed in and arrested a friend or an accomplice, or even if they broke into the flat and found it empty, Mesrine would almost certainly hear about it. The Paris police knew not to underestimate the efficiency of the criminal information-network in that city. It was very likely that Mesrine might have an informer within the building. For that reason they were careful only to commandeer the flats of civil servants and lawyers, those of his neighbours least likely to be in league with Mesrine. Commissaire Broussard was superintending the operation, aided by Commissaire Leclerc. Both were brilliant, notable high-fliers in the police force and already familiar names to the public. Their fame and their intelligence did not make their present task any easier. And their ambition made them all the more determined to get Mesrine, the man the press infuriatingly described as *insaisissable*, 'untakeable', impossible to arrest.

By the early evening they had surrounded the building. Earlier they had decided not to send men into the garden in case Mesrine was in his flat, and looked out of his window and saw them. Now they decided to risk it. One by one, half a dozen police marksmen slipped into the garden, taking shelter in the shady corners and behind trees. Throughout the day Broussard and Leclerc had been in constant touch, by radio, with headquarters. Commissaire Bouvier himself, the head of the Police Judiciare, was kept informed of the situation and discussed it with them at intervals. He now agreed with them. At the risk of alerting Mesrine they were going to have to find out whether he was in the flat. And if he was, they were to go in and get him, preferably alive. But he was a killer and would be prepared to shoot his way out. They were to be equally prepared to shoot if necessary.

Jacques was lying peacefully on a sofa upstairs, listening to records and chatting to Francine. A bottle of champagne lay beside him in an ice-bucket. After his narrow escape the day before, and the arrest of his young and inexperienced accomplice,

he had been listless. It was true that there were new crimes to plan and carry out, new outrages that would enthral the public and increase his fame. But for the moment he was tired. It was unusual for him not to want to go out at all during the day. He used to delight in walking through the streets of Paris, feeling all around him the pulsating life of the city he loved. But today he had rested, had spent the time quietly indoors pottering round the flat.

He had not recovered from the death of his father: he still felt the loss like a physical wound. Life went on, but Jacques was dragging with him the weight of his grief and he would find himself in need of peace and rest, to gather his strength. There was a knock at his door. Jacques hauled himself to his feet and went over to answer it. Automatically he fingered the Colt 45 tucked into the back of his belt. It was the *concierge*. She began to explain that some work had to be done in his flat the next day. She asked whether he would be in. Mesrine told her that he would be there and bade her 'bonsoir'. He was not in the mood to spend time chatting to old women.

Broussard now knew all he needed to. Rapidly policemen were brought in from the street. They were stationed on the service stairs. They were moved into yet more neighbouring flats. On the main staircase, on every landing, on every balcony there were guns pointing towards Mesrine's hideout. It was just after 8.30 p.m. when a loud and violent knocking disturbed Mesrine's reverie. 'Police! Open up!'

Mesrine leapt to his feet. He was alert now, ready for action. Francine had been dozing. He woke her up. 'Quick, the *flics* are here.' Mesrine knew that there was no time to be lost. 'Get down on the floor. I'm going to take my chance. Goodbye, little girl.' He went into the kitchen, planning to jump from the window (the flat was on the second floor). A second warning rang out – 'You're surrounded. This is your second warning. Give yourself up.' Mesrine was thinking: he realized that the police knew he was there – he understood now why the *concierge* had come up to talk to him. But the lights were still off in his flat. It was possible that he would be able to climb out of a window unseen and get into another flat, or get down into the garden. He looked out of the window. Hardly moving, but just discernible in the shrubbery, lurking in the shadows, were several police gunmen. He glanced towards the balcony of the next-door flat. There, glistening in the twilight, was

the barrel of a rifle. He looked the other way. There was no doubt about it. The police were everywhere. If he attempted to make a break for it, he would almost certainly be shot.

'This is your last warning. We're going to send in gas.' His brain was exploring every possibility. He could see no way out. 'Give yourself up. This is your last warning.' Francine, who may not have known even then that her lover was Jacques Mesrine, saw him rub his thumb over the handle of his revolver. She pleaded with him not to attempt to shoot his way out. Mesrine realized that she was right. If he tried to shoot his way out, he would get the worst of it. He played for time. 'You don't know who I am,' he yelled hopefully. 'Yes we do, you're Mesrine. Come on, you haven't got one chance in a thousand of getting away. Don't be a fool.' The voice was calm, almost reassuring, authoritative. Mesrine was still delaying the moment of his arrest, wondering whether he might have a chance. 'Well done,' he called back. 'And who are you?' 'Commissaire Broussard.' 'Broussard? the whiz kid of the "anti-gangs"?' 'That's right,' the avuncular voice replied without humility. 'Have you got a photograph with you? Slide it under the door.'

Broussard took his identity card out of his hip pocket and pushed it under the door. On the stairs behind him a marksman, clutching a rifle with a telescopic sight, wearing reinforced goggles and a bullet-proof vest shuffled from one foot to the other. Dozens of other policemen, stationed all around him, were sharing his concealed impatience. On the other side of the door Mesrine picked up the card. He went across the room to the bookshelf where he kept an album of press cuttings about great policemen. He turned to Broussard's section and tore out an article praising Broussard for his brilliance over an affair with some Palestinian terrorists. He wrapped the identity card in the press cutting and pushed it back under the door. 'O.K., it's certainly you,' Mesrine called out.

Broussard persisted, without losing his patience. 'Are you going to open the door or not?' 'Listen, there's a girl with me. She has nothing to do with any crime.' The police had reckoned without this. They had thought that Mesrine was alone, since the *concierge* had told them that she had not seen anyone go up to the flat that day. If he was telling the truth, it meant that they would have to be a little more careful about shooting their way in. It was always bad publicity for the police to kill innocent

girls. 'A girl? Make her say something,' he called out; Broussard's years in the police force had made him a distrustful man. Francine spoke: 'Yes, *monsieur*, there is a woman with him.' She could not think what else to say. 'Listen, Broussard, I know you're a decent man. I'll come quietly if you give me your word that you won't keep the girl for more than twenty-four hours. If you promise to let her go, I'll give myself up. Otherwise, you can come and get me.' Broussard conferred briefly with Leclerc. 'Agreed,' he called out a minute later. 'You have my word, unless we find out that she's wanted for something else. Now, come on.' 'I need twenty minutes, then I'll open up.' 'What are you going to do?' 'Not what you think,' Mesrine said, laughing enigmatically. 'All right then, twenty minutes.'

Broussard knew, of course, that Mesrine would use the time to destroy papers that he didn't want the police to see. But if granting him the time meant that they could avoid bloodshed, it would be worth it. Mesrine asked Francine to pack his bag and went into the kitchen. There he put into a saucepan the pieces of paper containing the plans for his next crimes. He was not careless enough to have written down the real names of any of his accomplices, or of his planned targets. He knew that there was a risk that the police would manage to decode and piece together quite a lot of the truth, so he set fire to the papers. As the flames died away, he ground up the blackened remains, then washed them down the sink. He rinsed away every trace of ash.

Outside on the stairs there was a strong smell of burning. 'What are you up to?' Broussard called out. 'I'm burning everything that would interest you,' Mesrine yelled back. 'Come on, Jacques, you've had your twenty minutes.' 'I'll take as long as I want.' Mesrine had collected together all his false identity cards, put them in the saucepan and set fire to them. He knew that the police would examine the ashes and discover what they were. But it did not really matter if they found out what names he had been using. He told Francine to get some glasses and open another bottle of champagne. Wherever Mesrine lived while he was on the run, he always kept his fridge stocked with vintage champagne. As he kissed Francine goodbye he told her not to worry, that Broussard would keep his word.

On the stairs the heavily armed policemen were getting increasingly restless. 'For God's sake, Jacques, hurry up!'

'I'm coming, *flic*, I'm coming.' A minute later, 'Hey Broussard.' 'Yes?' 'They say you're really tough.' 'And so are you, I gather.' 'Do you dare to come in here unarmed? We both know that you're only here because I've been betrayed. I'd like to give you the opportunity to take some risk in arresting me.' Broussard handed his revolver to a young policeman. Mesrine had no intention of attacking Broussard. He knew that he was going to be arrested. But he was determined to go in such a way that would remind the world that he was no ordinary crook. He was pleased that the famous policeman believed that he would act honourably and not shoot him while he was unarmed.

Suddenly, with no notice, Mesrine opened the door. He stood there, elegant in a soft deer-skin jacket and a cashmere sweater, smoking a large cigar. He stepped forward, smiling broadly as if to welcome the menacing-looking crowd gathered outside his flat. 'Congratulations, Commissaire. You've won this round. Come in. Would you like a glass of champagne?' And without waiting for an answer Mesrine picked up the bottle standing on a side-table near the door, and poured three glasses. Broussard and Leclerc were understandably stunned, but they drank the champagne Mesrine offered them, while he again offered his congratulations.

Although the moment of his arrest was a disaster for him, he succeeded in getting the most out of it. Mesrine had stage-managed it brilliantly. Before he opened the door to the police he had shaved and changed his clothes. It would be a pity not to be looking smart when so many policemen saw him for the first time. And of course it was possible that there would be photographers and journalists around. When the police searched the flat later that evening they found that Mesrine had neatly arranged all his guns and ammunition on his bed, almost like a soldier's kit, ready for inspection.

After they drained the glasses, Broussard, with a gesture to a junior police officer, ordered handcuffs to be put on Mesrine and Francine. 'Take them away,' he said.

10

It had been a wonderful summer. Mesrine had been free for 108 days, from June to September. But now, he knew, he faced the grim prospect of a very long stretch inside. He would be lucky if he was ever allowed out of prison, except in a coffin. The police would almost certainly press for him to be sentenced to *reclusion perpetuelle*, full life-imprisonment.

He was taken from the flat in the rue Vergniaud to a local police station, where he was kept until the next morning. He was angry that he was kept handcuffed all night. But the police were determined that the most wanted man in France wasn't going to get away again.

At two o'clock the next afternoon Francine was freed. Commissaire Broussard had kept his word. During the night Pierre Tebirent had been picked up by the police: he had come to see Mesrine at the rue Vergniaud flat as they had arranged earlier in the day. On the following Saturday, four more of his associates were arrested as they arrived at Mesrine's flat. This time they had not telephoned to check that all was clear. And on Sunday, 1 October, Michel Hardouin was arrested. He had just left his flat at 11, Square Jasmin, in the 16th *arrondissement* to buy newspapers across the road in the avenue Mozart when he suddenly found himself surrounded by half-a-dozen armed policemen. For once Michel had left the flat without a gun, and was forced to surrender quietly.

Jacques was taken back to La Santé, to the cell he had been in before being taken to the Palais de Justice at Compiègne early in June. 'Bad luck, eh, Mesrine,' a senior officer greeted him as he was led back into the grim, fortress-style building. 'Looking like that I wouldn't have recognized you,' he remarked, studying Mesrine's bearded face. As the heavy iron gates closed behind him Mesrine realized with some surprise that he was not unhappy. He knew that he would be there for some time and that this time it would be much more difficult to escape; but he did not doubt that he would manage it eventually.

Now that he was in prison it would be possible for him to write to Janou, and perhaps even to have a visit from her. And in La Santé there were friends from long ago, and men he had met earlier that year, whom he would be glad to see again. His

status within the prison community had increased enormously since his escape. Some criminals have said that they did not understand Mesrine, but they did admire the fact that he had so clearly outwitted the police. And his recent arrest had produced a spate of publicity: stories about him filled the newspapers. Prisoners who were in La Santé at the same time as Mesrine, even for minor crimes, invariably claim to have known him. Each of them has his own anecdote, some incident in which he watched Mesrine making a fool of a warder, or some dramatic revelation that Mesrine apparently made to him alone. Like people who have been at school with someone who later became a celebrity, no old boy of La Santé will admit that Mesrine never spoke to him.

No sooner was Mesrine in the prison than he began to consider how he might get out. He was sure that he would stand a better chance of escaping from a courtroom than from a cell. He had friends who had already agreed to try to infiltrate the court wearing lawyers' robes and bring guns in with them. Mesrine would then be able to make a run for it from the court to a getaway car, just as he had at Compiègne. He was, therefore, very keen to appear in court. He knew, given the French judicial system, that it would probably be a matter of years, quite literally, before he was tried for his crimes.

Mesrine did not want to vegetate in jail for that long. During his first few days in prison he read every newspaper report of his arrest that he could get his hands on. He was delighted by the coverage that the press gave to it. Most of the more popular papers ran separate articles summarizing the life and misdeeds of 'Public Enemy No. 1'. The articles were extraordinarily inaccurate. It was obvious that very little was in fact known about him. The one 'fact' that the papers all seemed to have picked up was that Jacques had claimed to have killed thirty-nine people. Almost all the journalists seemed to have taken his word for it. Repeatedly they described Mesrine as a very dangerous man and an accomplished killer, and they credited him with crimes he had not committed. Jacques even suspected that some of them had invented crimes with which to accuse him, since they did not have sufficiently lurid details about him to substantiate his reputation. Mesrine was not displeased by this – it hardly mattered to him that the articles were inaccurate. They were making him famous, which was what he wanted

While reading the reports in prison, Jacques had an inspira-

tion. He filed suits for defamation of character against four newspapers. He thought that these cases would be bound to be heard before his own trial came up. But he did not take into account the extraordinarily slow, bureaucratic processes of the French legal system. He learned that it was going to be more than two years before even these straightforward claims against defamation would be brought to court. So he devised another scheme. He attacked a policeman on duty inside the prison. He was sure that he would be taken to court quickly for that. But the matter was dealt with internally, by the ordinary disciplinary procedures of the prison. It was proving to be more difficult than he had imagined to get himself into court.

Mesrine was writing to Jeanne and Jocelyne almost daily. Jocelyne was living with her parents, depressed by her separation from Mesrine but still hopeful that he might escape and that they might be reunited. She knew by now that she was not going to be prosecuted by the Canadian police, but her life was very difficult because it became known that she had been the girlfriend of Jacques Mesrine. She was sacked from several jobs when her employers discovered about her past, or treated like a criminal and had to leave.

She wanted to see Jean-Paul Mercier in prison. He was in the Saint Vincent de Paul prison near Montreal, which he and Mesrine had escaped from two years earlier. Jocelyne was refused permission to visit Jean-Paul the first time she applied. She applied again, this time under a false name. Mercier had been sentenced to life-imprisonment twice, and an extra 270 years. Suzanne was serving ten years for complicity. Jocelyne and Jean-Paul discussed ways in which she could help him to escape. To her amazement she discovered that Mesrine had managed during this time to communicate with Mercier, and that he too was proposing escape plans. Jacques had arranged to have letters smuggled out of La Santé for him by guards. The letters were addressed to friends in Canada who then managed to have them smuggled into the Canadian jail. In the course of this conspiring a workable plan began to emerge, in which Jocelyne would aid Jean-Paul. Once out he would carry out a series of robberies to accumulate some money. Thus financed, he and a group of friends would cross the Atlantic and enter France with forged passports. Once he was in Paris with accomplices, cash and arms, Mercier was certain that he would be able to 'spring' Mesrine from La Santé. When Mercier first suggested to Joce-

lyne that she bring him a gun, which she would hand over to him in the Visiting Room, she was horrified. She was used to Mesrine's planning, to the incredibly detailed schemes he worked out where every eventuality was considered. The idea of just walking into the prison to visit Jean-Paul and handing a gun over to him seemed to her fraught with danger. But she wanted to prove her devotion to Jacques by helping his friend to escape, and she was genuinely fond of Mercier. In any case she did not have a better suggestion.

So, on 22 October 1974, Jocelyne Deraiche went to visit Jean-Paul Mercier. She carried a denim shoulder-bag. At the bottom of her bag were two revolvers. She was accompanied by Carole Moreau, a friend of Pierre Vincent, one of the convicts in the mass escape from St Vincent de Paul in August 1972. He had been recaptured within an hour or two on that occasion, but was eager to try again. Three other criminals, each regarded as 'dangerous', were going to attempt to escape with Mercier and Vincent: Richard Blass, Edgar Roussel and Robert Frappier.

Jocelyne had posted a letter to her mother the day before the escape attempt, telling her that by the end of the day of the 22nd she would be arrested, dead, or on the run with Jean-Paul, waiting to return to Paris with him to free Mesrine.

The canvas bag with the revolvers in it was heavy, but Jocelyne tried to look as though she had nothing in it but the usual make-up and love-letters. She smiled at the warder who was examining the visitors' entry permits. He knew her by sight from her previous visits, and told her not to bother to show him her papers: 'If only everyone who comes here was as nice as you, my job would be much more cheerful,' he told her, as he had Mercier called to the Visiting Room. Within minutes all five men and their visitors were in the room. Pierre Vincent looked at Mercier, who was sitting next to him, half stood up from his chair and smashed his fist through the pane of glass that separated the convicts from their guests. He snatched Jocelyne's bag and grabbed the revolvers. Richard, Robert and Edgar at the same moment hurled themselves at the guards, and overcame them. A child began to cry. Jean-Paul and Pierre, now armed with loaded revolvers, kept the warders covered while the other three ran ahead out of the room.

The men got away. Jocelyne and Carole were arrested and by that evening Jocelyne was back in prison, at Tanguay, near Montreal. It was Carole's first experience of prison life, but

for Jocelyne the smells of the institution and the sense of despair, boredom, and misery were familiar, although she realized that after Fleury-Mérogis the Canadian jail was really not so bad: there was a swimming pool, a gymnasium, a hairdressing salon and a library. Twice a week her mother visited her, and she was constantly in touch with Raymond Daoust, the brilliant lawyer who had represented Mesrine and Jeanne during their unjust trial for the murder of Madame Le Bouthillier, the motel owner. There was little alternative for Jocelyne but to plead guilty. She was sentenced to twenty-three months' imprisonment.

Eight days after the escape Jean-Paul Mercier, Robert Frappier and Pierre Vincent robbed the Banque Royale in northeast Montreal. Just as they were leaving the bank the police arrived and a gunfight ensued. Pierre escaped. Robert was badly wounded, but recovered in a prison hospital. Paul was killed by a single bullet in the head. Both Mesrine and Jocelyne were deeply upset by his death, as was his girlfriend, Suzanne Francoeur, who was still in Tanguay prison. If he had not succeeded in escaping he would almost certainly never have left the jail alive.

In La Santé Mesrine received several visitors. Jeanne Schneider was brought to see him under escort from Fleury-Mérogis. She and Jacques had not seen each other for over two years, not since he escaped from the Montreal prison. Although she had read in the press that he had been with Jocelyne during that time she did not reproach him. She assumed that she still was the most important woman in his life. His obvious affection for her, even if he had been unfaithful to her, gave her some hope of a normal life eventually. She had been in prison now for five and a half years altogether. Mesrine noticed that she was beginning to go grey, that the time she had served had aged her. He was angry that she was being kept in prison while awaiting trial, and was certain that it was only because she had been his mistress. The excuse often used for keeping prisoners in custody before trial was that they might intimidate prosecution witnesses. In Jeanne's case this hardly made sense, since the main witness, the victim of the robbery, had died a few months earlier.

Janou was not the only visitor who came to see Mesrine. His mother came to see him as often as she could. Together they talked about Jacques's children and about his father. For as long as possible Mme Mesrine had hidden from Sabrina the truth about her father's criminal activities. Mesrine later regretted

that she had not been told when he discovered that she felt that he had abandoned her for no reason at all. Her grandmother's worry that the revelation would be traumatic for her couldn't have been more unnecessary. 'Papa is in prison? Then I can go and see him!'

Her only reaction to the news was delight. Now she would be able to see him regularly. She wrote to him several times while waiting for permission to visit and he replied at once. Mesrine later admitted that he had been nervous before her first visit. He had seen her only briefly during the last seven years. He had always adored her and he had felt, especially since the death of his father, that he needed his daughter as much as she needed him. He had suffered bitterly as a result of his father's absence during his childhood. He realized that he had inflicted a similar deprivation on Sabrina. He felt guilty that he had not been around to educate his daughter. He said later that his real punishment began with Sabrina's first visit to him in La Santé. She pleaded with him not to escape: it would mean she would lose him again. That was the only good reason he thought he had ever had for staying inside. At the end of her first visit she promised that she would come as often as she could.

Time passed. Mesrine spent all of 1974 and 1975 in prison. He was not idle. He read every newspaper he could get hold of, and there was always a row of books in his cell. He had always wanted to write, often thought of writing, and now, at last, he had plenty of time. He began to draft an autobiography, typing it out with one finger.

He filled the time with other activities. He made extraordinary elaborate models, usually of boats or houses, which he gave to his lawyers and to his family. They represented a considerable achievement as they were constructed entirely out of materials that he could glean inside the prison, such as used matches and scraps of wood from camembert boxes. Only the paint was specially provided for him. Even the hyper-suspicious prison authorities could not think how tiny tins of paint might be used in an escape. The finished modesl were as impressive as any that might be made with the most suitable materials. The boats show that he must have had an unusually good memory. They were mostly nineteenth-century, high-masted sailing ships. But without access to reference books about ships Mesrine made models that were historically fairly accurate.

He was still awaiting trial. He had several lawyers working

on his behalf, led by Jean-Louis Pelletier, a celebrated advocate who worked from a luxurious suite of offices in the avenue Victor-Hugo. He would ask to see his lawyers at every opportunity. An interview with one of them relieved the monotony of his life. Jacques always needed an audience, needed to be able to talk to people. And except when there were visitors, he had to spend twenty-three hours a day alone in his cell. Every Monday Sabrina came and during this time he got to know the daughter of whom he had seen so little. He was very keen that she should acquire some sort of training. She had left her convent without any idea of what she might do. Mesrine arranged for her to go to a secretarial college. He was strict with her as well as being being affectionate. He would become angry if he thought that she was wasting her time or being stupid. Sabrina later admitted that his rages were terrifying, even though he was on the other side of a reinforced screen and there were warders outside the room. And she was the one person in the world he loved most.

Although he was writing, making models and spending time in his cell doing exercises, the frustrations of prison life were almost unbearable for Mesrine. He would become quite irrationally angry and found it difficult to keep a grip on reality. He was convinced that Jocelyne had only ever wanted to be with him for his money, that she had never really loved him. And although he later said, he was half-aware at the time that his suspicions were nonsense, he couldn't help himself. He knew that he was being unjust to Jocelyne and that he was being cruel, unfairly, to other people. But he needed to release his anger.

At the beginning of November 1975 Mesrine sent a menacing letter to a Paris journalist, Jacques Derogy, at the weekly magazine *L'Express*. He was angry about the tone of an article Derogy had written about him and Mesrine threatened to kill him. The letter was smuggled out of La Santé. It is not known whether he was still trying to arrange for himself to appear in court, so that he could try to escape.

Mesrine was transferred every now and then from one prison to another. It was while he was in the men's wing of Fleury-Mérogis that he finished his autobiography, and managed to smuggle it out. Officially, any prisoner who wanted to communicate with a publisher was supposed to seek permission from the Procurator of the Republic of France. Although prisoners were allowed to write, the authorities were understandably sensitive

about allowing them to publish. Mesrine had no reason to suppose that he would be allowed to send his manuscript out of the prison. So he sent it out illicitly.

Bulky buff envelopes containing the manuscript landed on editors' desks in most of the leading Paris publishing houses. Almost all of them turned it down for various reasons. Some were afraid that it was justifying crime. Others were horrified that Mesrine boasted in the book of his violent past without any remorse at all. And a couple were afraid that by publishing the book they might involve themselves in legal difficulties. And it just did not appeal to some. But Editions Jean-Claude Lattes decided to take it on, and in February 1977 they brought it out under the title, *L'Instinct de Mort* (*The Killing Instinct*). The book was immediately denounced by the police and the underworld alike as being 'a pack of lies'. Much of it certainly was.

While he had been in prison Mesrine had changed the image of himself that he had formerly tried to project to the public. It was difficult from a prison cell to remind people that he was a witty and stylish gangster, so he took a new line in his autobiography and tried to convince the world that he was a dangerous and ruthless killer. He admitted that his claim to have killed thirty-nine people was a spur-of-the-moment invention, but he did describe in great detail several murders that he claimed to have committed. For these so-called murders there have as yet been no bodies reported missing *or* found. The police were outraged that he dared to pretend to have tortured and killed people they believed he had not killed. They knew that he was dangerous and they were riled by his lack of fear of the law, which was such that in order to achieve even more publicity for himself he would wildly exaggerate his crimes. The publication of *L'Instinct de Mort* led to the formulation of a new French law, known as *la loi Mesrine*, whereby no criminal could receive the profits from any account of his crimes.

Mesrine had by now spent three and a half years in prison. Throughout that time the slow, methodical French legal machinery had been grinding away, preparing its case against him. Finally, in May 1977 the Prosecution was ready and the case opened. It was three months since the publication of *L'Instinct de Mort* and a debate was still raging about the propriety of publishing the self-glorifying, megalomaniac ravings of a half-confessed killer. There was now greater interest in Mesrine than ever before; no one who had read his book was likely to

believe that he was innocent of anything he was accused of, or that he deserved lenient treatment.

The Palais de Justice, in the heart of Paris on the Ile de la Cité, was almost under a state of siege for the trial. Mesrine was escorted to the court from prison in an armoured van, accompanied on its route by cars full of armed policemen and outriders in front and behind. Inside the court there were rows of policemen, and the dock itself was surrounded by police marksmen. Michel Hardouin, Pierre Tebirent and Pierre Verheyden were all to be tried with Mesrine, but the centre of the stage belonged to Mesrine.

It took two days to read the detailed list of charges, to read out the names of the 224 witnesses who had been called and to select a jury. Again and again jurors were rejected. The panel of citizens who were to judge Mesrine finally agreed on consisted of four women and five men. The average age of the jurors was thirty-five. It was a much younger jury than usual and there were more women. Both these factors might have been expected to work in Mesrine's favour. The trial lasted a fortnight.

The prosecutor, M. Lucien Langlois, pressed hard for life-imprisonment for Mesrine. Mesrine denied none of the Prosecution allegations, but talked to the court about himself at great length. He told them about his childhood during the war, and his father leaving home to join the army. He described, '. . . the little boy of four years old looking after the cows and thinking about his father. . . .' He told them about the hardships of life at boarding-school, and his 'first mistake', his marriage to the girl from Martinique. He described his life in the army and his first steps in the criminal world. He talked about his first prison sentence, at Evreux; his experiences in jail in Canada, and his later criminal career. There was a traditional prejudice in the magistrature against 'middle-class' criminals. Hardouin, Grangier and Mesrine were all children from relatively privileged homes, although some of the snootier journalists remarked on Mesrine's 'parvenu air'. Whether the prejudice against middle-class criminals would operate on this occasion remained to be seen.

It was inevitable that there should be some dramatic highlight to the trial. The police, the press and the judiciary behaved as if they were almost expecting Mesrine to attempt to escape, and his reputation was such that they would not have been surprised if he had somehow managed to succeed. On this occasion Mesrine made no attempt to escape.

On the fourth day of the trial, Friday, 6 May, Langlois, the prosecutor, stood up at the beginning of the day's proceedings and said that he had to read to the jury a report he had received from the prison of Fresnes, where Mesrine was being held, about an incident that had happened the previous day. When Mesrine had been returned to the prison after the day's court hearing he discovered that the man in the next-door cell had been put in the punishment block. Mesrine had threatened to cause a scandal unless the punishment was lifted. The prison guards paid no attention and Mesrine had set fire to his cell.

He did not succeed in causing any significant damage. Mesrine listened as Langlois read the charge then leapt to his feet. 'I asked Debriel (his prison neighbour) to listen to the radio and tape what they said about my trial. That's not against the rules. Debriel is in preventive detention, like me, and we are allowed to have radios and cassette recorders.' Mesrine continued to rant and rave about unjust punishments and about the corruption of the prison authorities. He was talking wildly; nobody listening to him could have believed that he was a rational man, or even that he was likely to be telling the truth. Yet he was spell-binding. As he spoke he commanded attention by his personality and his presence. It was difficult to agree with the picture he was giving of the French penal system. But the sound of his voice was seductive.

'Well, Messieurs Magistrates, what good are the bars, the chains and the solitary confinement in if you can buy the keys that open the doors or the locks of the handcuffs?' His voice was low and confident. He spoke slowly. He knew that he was in control of his audience. He loosened the knot of his tie. He seemed to be pausing, resting for a second. Then, with the deftness of a conjuror, he produced a matchbox from inside the knot. In a moment he had opened it to reveal a small strip of plaster. He closed the box and threw it towards the journalists who were gathered in the court. 'Three thousand francs. That's all it cost me to buy from a prison employee a print of the keys for the handcuffs they use to transfer people from one prison to another.' A policeman grabbed the box and handed it to the presiding judge, Charles Petit. On the plaster, clearly visible, were the imprints of two small keys.

'Silence!' the judge ordered angrily. In every corner of the court a low babble of voices had broken out. Mesrine's dramatic gesture had had the desired effect. It was sensational. Only the

team of lawyers entrusted with the already difficult enough task of defending Mesrine looked miserable. A handsome woman lawyer rested her head on the palm of her hand, on her face an expression of weariness. Everyone else in court was delighted. The prosecution, horrified by Mesrine's latest outrage, were animated in their disapproval. The public gallery was alive with excitement. The accused man had been holding the floor and suddenly, with a flourish had brought his cabaret act to a climax. There was no applause, but the homage paid to Mesrine's theatrical mastery was unmistakable.

The reporters buzzed with excitement. They were unsure whether to leave the court, or find a telephone and file the story immediately, ahead of their rivals. Most stayed, unwilling to lose a moment of the performance that Mesrine was giving them.

But the peak of excitement had passed, although Mesrine continued to behave with flamboyance and confidence. The other three accused were quieter, answering meekly and almost self-effacingly when spoken to. In his exploitation of the trial as a means of publicity for himself, Mesrine did not forget to do what he could to help his co-defendants. He pointed out to the court that when Michel Grangier had taken part in two holdups with him, he had not had a loaded weapon. Mesrine emphazised that on a job he would allow only a 'professional' to have a loaded gun.

The judge emphazised to the jury that Mesrine was always unnecessarily heavily armed. He pointed out that Mesrine did not need to have a complete arsenal of dangerous weapons just to intimidate people when he was robbing banks. 'A plastic pistol would do as well.' Mesrine agreed and said that when the 'anti-gangs' started to use toy guns he would be happy to do the same.

In the summing-up for the Prosecution Lucien Langlois was fierce. 'You talk about your criminal activity as if it was your job, and claim that you performed it "cleanly". But "clean" gangsters do not exist, any more than the "honour" of the underworld. This gangster's sense of honour which you tell us about is merely a dishonest fabrication. You tell us that during your robberies you have never killed anyone. That is true, but only because it was not necessary. Deep down you wanted to kill. You are a danger to public safety, to life in society, which I defend from criminals like you.' He demanded that Mesrine should be sentenced to life-imprisonment, *reclusion perpetuelle.*

Jean-Louis Pelletier stood up to speak. Beside him on the Defence Lawyers' bench sat Genevieve Aiche, pretty, auburn-haired, but looking sober and concerned. She was the lawyer who had represented Mesrine during the outcry over his autobiography. Despite the personal respect that she admitted for him she had good reason to know the strength of prejudice against him in legal circles in France. Defending him was an unenviable task, but Pelletier threw himself into it. He was a large, impressive man, dignified in the traditional black robes of a French barrister. The defendant was not the only brilliant orator in court that day. Pelletier's rich voice rang out in the Palais de Justice. The talent and learning of the lawyer were evident, as well as his affection for Mesrine. Throughout the trial the rapport between the two men had been noticeable, and the respect shown for the accused by his lawyer was crucial in persuading the jury that the man they had to judge deserved special consideration, almost leniency.

It was warm in the courtroom, and the trial had been going on for a fortnight. As Pelletier's sonorous phrases rang round the courtroom all eyes were on him. 'When I look at him, what distresses me is the appalling waste of a man's life.' The jury were sitting upright, alert. 'To free Mesrine from his own image there is only one solution: to treat him like anyone else, not to destroy him like a dog. The man who defends himself before a court deserves first of all to be understood. He deserves perhaps to be punished. He does not deserve to be annihilated. Sentence him to ten, fifteen years, but I beg of you not more.'

The judge and jury retired to consider their verdict. Mesrine thanked and congratulated Jean-Louis Pelletier for his virtuoso performance. But it seemed unlikely that it would save Mesrine from life-imprisonment. He was, after all, Public-Enemy-Number-One, and he had just published an autobiography boasting of his brutality.

The jury had obviously been moved by Maître Pelletier's pleading. They returned with Judge Petit, who according to convention had been chairman of their discussion. Mesrine was sentenced to twenty years in prison. That his sentence was not life imprisonment represented a great triumph for his lawyers. Michel Hardouin and Michel Grangier were each sentenced to twelve years in prison. Pierre Verheyden was given a lighter sentence, in recognition of his 'co-operation' with the police.

So Mesrine's trial ended and he was driven back, under heavy

escort, to prison. One of those who was to have stood trial with Mesrine had been missing: Jeanne Schneider. She had been released from prison a little over six months previously and had then decided that she had had enough of Mesrine. She was determined to escape the fear and the constant danger that had haunted her ever since she and Mesrine had flown to Canada together. It had not been easy for her to find or keep a job, and the idea of having to return to prison, for the duration of the trial, had been too much for her. She had tried to kill herself by taking an overdose of drugs. She was rushed to hospital unconscious and the doctors had succeeded in saving her life. But she was not sufficiently well to stand trial with the other defendants.

Mesrine was unwilling to pass out of the limelight when his trial ended. He continued to write to the press, as he had done before his trial, usually protesting over prison conditions. He gave an interview to the magazine *Paris Match*, which was published at the beginning of June 1977. In it he repeated a claim he had made earlier that Pierre Verheyden, who had betrayed him in 1973, was still alive only because Mesrine had not ordered his execution. He could have done so, he said, but he had chosen not to because he blamed himself for working with such an amateur.

Jocelyne had been freed from Tanguay prison in Canada on 8 March 1976. For her, as well as for Jeanne, life after prison was difficult. Not only was there the usual difficulty in finding a job, but there was frequent hostility shown towards her and her family by people who had read about her and Mesrine. After Jocelyne's release from prison in 1976 Sabrina went out to Montreal to stay with the Deraiche family. She and Jocelyne had got to know each other well in 1973, during the period before and just after Mesrine's escape from the court. It was now the summer of the Olympic Games in Montreal. The Deraiche family were warm and friendly towards Sabrina despite her being the daughter of the man who had brought so much trouble to Jocelyne. Together Jocelyne and Sabrina went to put some flowers on Jean-Paul Mercier's grave. Even in death Mercier had not succeeded in escaping from the law. After shooting him in a Montreal street the police had refused to allow his family to bury him normally. He lay now in an unnamed grave in the prison cemetery, marked only by the number the prison authorities had given him.

Jocelyne had not seen Jacques since she had flown back to

Canada in 1973. But after a brief period of estrangement as a result of Jacques's irrational attacks on her, they had written to each other almost every day. Jacques sent her poems and elaborate drawings with his letters. In his letters he talked of the future, when he might be released and they could marry. Jocelyne decided to return to France, to visit Jacques in jail, and to try to marry him in prison. When she arrived in Paris she consulted one of Mesrine's lawyers, Christiane Giletti, who arranged an interview for her at the Palais de Justice. The purpose of the interview was for Jocelyne to receive permission to stay in France, and to be given the necessary papers to allow her to visit Mesrine in La Santé. The date of the interview was Monday 17 April 1978. Inside the Palais, Jocelyne was arrested. That evening she was back in prison. She was told that she was going to be charged with using false identity papers five years before, when she was living in France with Mesrine.

Mesrine was very angry. Up till then the letters he had been sending to her in Canada assumed that he would serve his sentence and hope to have some remission. Now he wrote to her in Fleury-Mérogis, talking openly of escaping. He sent a letter every day, and in each he referred to the fact that he would soon get out.

No one had ever escaped from La Santé, but the prison authorities felt that with Mesrine they could not afford to take any risks. So they built a special top-security wing. It was there that Jacques Mesrine was being held.

II

On 3 May 1978, Jean Fagianelli, the Deputy Governor of La Santé Prison, received an anonymous telephone call on the direct line, 336–40–50. It was a tip-off telling him that Mesrine was planning to escape in two days time, on Friday, 5 May. No one took it very seriously; in the prison world there are endless rumours of plots that never existed.

It rained on Friday, 5 May, so Mesrine's scheme had to be postponed. A new date was fixed – Monday, 8 May – and the plan went ahead. At 9.50 a.m. three of the four occupants of the top-security wing were taking their daily exercise in the small triangular courtyards adjoining their living quarters. In yard

number nine was Carman Rives, aged twenty-six, robber and murderer. In yard number five were François Besse, aged thirty-four, bank robber, and Mesrine.

Mesrine had been in prison and was determined to escape. He refused to believe that there was a prison from which escape was impossible. He concentrated all his energy on identifying the weaker links in the prison system and was more familiar with the routine of the top-security wing, in theory and in practice, than any of his guards. He knew exactly how long it took to perform any particular task, which of the guards moved more slowly than the others. He thought carefully about whom he could get to know best and went out of his way to establish personal relationships with as many people as possible. The one thing he wasn't short of was time. He talked to the guards, to prison workmen, to the governor and his staff, to the doctors and nurses in the prison.

He studied the structure of the building with far more eagerness than he had shown when working for an architect. He considered the windows, doors, walls, ceilings, skylights and drains.

He was sure that now he had the answer.

At the same time as Mesrine, Besse and Rives went into their exercise-yards, Christiane Giletti, a gentle and distinguished 45-year-old lawyer, was entering the prison through the unwelcoming steel door above which, carved into the stone, were the ironic words: *Liberté Egalité Fraternité.* One of the many lawyers working for Jacques Mesrine, she had come, for the second time in four days, to talk to her client. She was escorted to the top-security wing and shown into an interview-room.

At 9.55 a.m. two guards went to look for Mesrine. They found him in the exercise-yard, and led him back to join Madame Giletti in the tiny (6ft by 4ft) interview-room. The space was divided across the middle by a plank table; Mesrine sat on one side of it, and on the other sat the lawyer. Two guards sat on metal stools in the corridor outside, able to watch the room through a reinforced plate-glass window in the wall.

At 10 a.m. François Besse asked to be taken back to his cell, complaining that he was feeling the cold. Carman Rives, aware that something was going on, asked to follow him.

Mesrine was discussing with Christiane Giletti the murder of the two forest rangers in Canada in 1972 while he was on the run from the Canadian police. He had always admitted that he had shot the two rangers who had cornered him, but only now,

owing to recent co-operation between the French and Canadian police forces, was he going to be tried. He tapped on the window and asked the guard to fetch a file of papers concerning the affair, from François Besse's cell. The guard agreed. It doesn't appear to have occurred to the guard to ask why a file of Mesrine's papers should have been in Besse's cell and he opened the outer, wooden door of the cell and asked for Mesrine's papers. Besse picked up a large box-file and attempted to hand it through the bars of the inner door. It was obviously too bulky to fit through. As the guard unlocked the inner door Besse threw the file at him and squirted soapy water into his eyes, at the same instant kneeing the warder in the groin. The second warder on duty outside the interview-room rushed to his aid. Seeing him approach, Besse quickly incapacitated the first warder – now lying on the ground groaning – with a kick in the face and turned towards the new aggressor.

Hearing the scramble, Mesrine pushed back his chair and jumped up on to the table, saying that he would prove to Madame Giletti that the room was bugged. With a pair of nail scissors he unscrewed in a single movement the cover of a ventilation shaft immediately over the table, and withdrew two pistols and a blue mountaineering rope with a steel grappling iron at one end.

Besse was pinned against the wall. The warder, whose entire strength was needed to hold him there and to avoid his lashing feet, felt the barrel of a revolver rammed into the back of his neck. 'Don't move.' The warder's hands relaxed their hold on Besse's arms. Besse pushed him violently backwards into the cell, and kicked the first warder in after him. Mesrine ordered them to take off their clothes. In turn each convict kept the guards covered while his accomplice put on the instantly recognizable uniforms of a navy blue cap, jacket, trousers and tie with a pale blue shirt. Mesrine locked the warders in the cells while Besse slipped the coil of mountaineering rope over his shoulder. The first part of the escape had gone exactly according to plan.

It was still not completely clear how Mesrine had arranged to have the arms smuggled into the prison. Mesrine told friends, much later, that at the time of his escape he was receiving help from two sources inside La Santé: one was rumoured to be an 'important' person in the prison service, who had promised to arrange a flat for him. The other was a warder who smuggled in the arms. Neither knew of the role played by the other at the

time. It is said that a week before the escape, on about 2 or 3 May, Mesrine was given the address of a flat near Les Invalides.

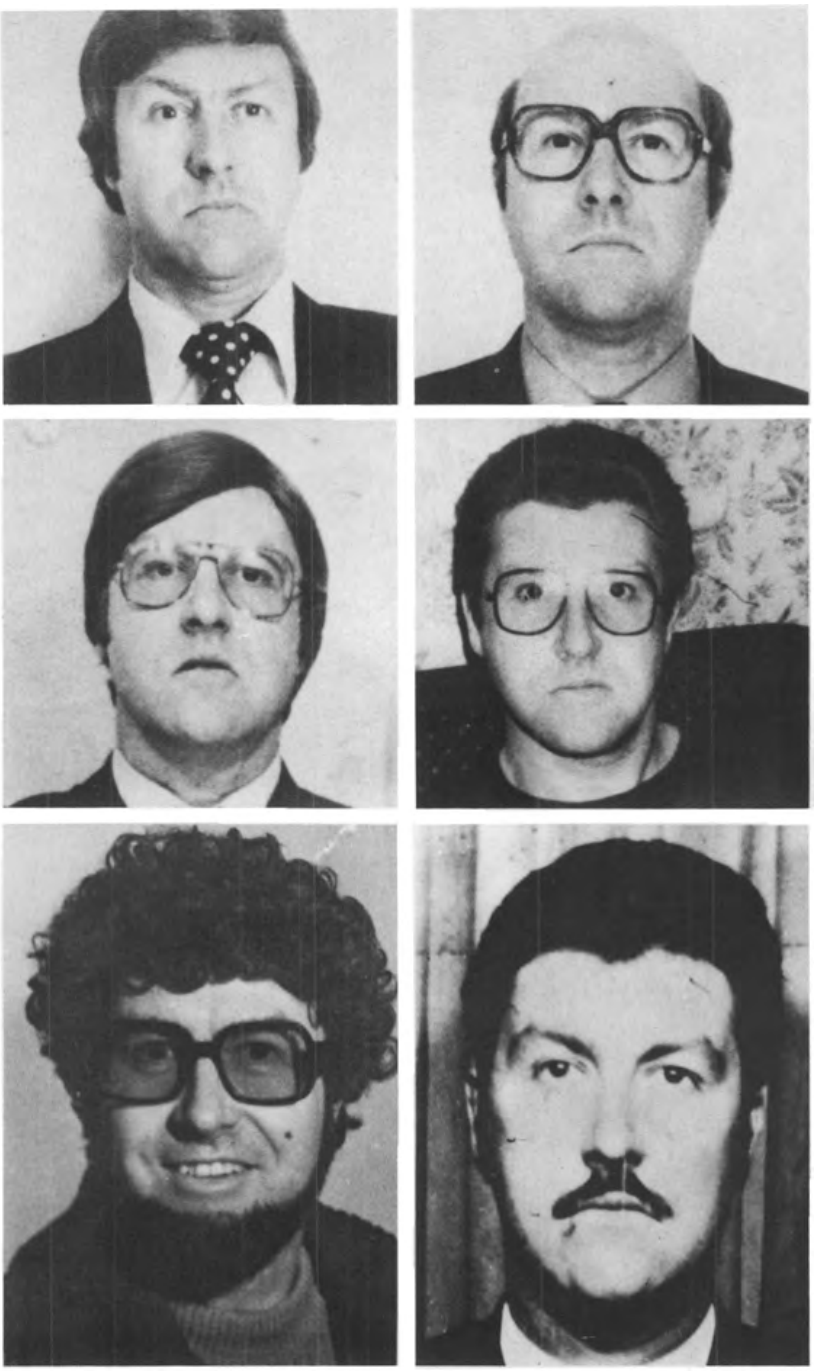
The second part of the scheme was that Mesrine and Besse, now dressed as warders, should make their way to the outer wall of the prison.

First they had to deal with the guards who were in the staff headquarters at the end of the corridor. As they passed Carman Rives's cell, Mesrine impulsively asked him, 'Do you want to come?' and without waiting for an answer unlocked the cell door.

Two assistant-governors, the chief warder and five other warders were in the staff office when the three convicts burst in. They were stripped of their arms, their keys and their papers. One of the warders was ordered to take off his uniform, and Rives put it on. Mesrine cut the telephone wires. Everything was going well. They had just locked the prison staff into their office when two of the nurses from the prison infirmary arrived. 'Take them as hostages,' Besse suggested. Mesrine refused. He told them that they would be perfectly safe, but that he had to take the precaution of locking them in a broom cupboard. It was 10.15, just twenty minutes since the guards had escorted him to the interview-room to meet Madame Giletti.

Unlocking the double doors of the top-security wing and letting themselves out, they ran across a yard to where M. Moret, the Chief of Works in the prison was standing on one of the bottom rungs of a ladder. For about a fortnight Moret and two of his workmen had been fixing new bars outside all the cell windows of the block opposite. They had been watched by Mesrine, who knew that only two cell windows were still without their new bars. They should have finished on Friday, only it had rained, so they had left the ladder padlocked in a shed on the other side of the prison and had worked indoors. The 'warders' ordered the workmen to move the ladder into the further courtyard that runs between the inner and outer walls of the prison, where it was needed urgently.

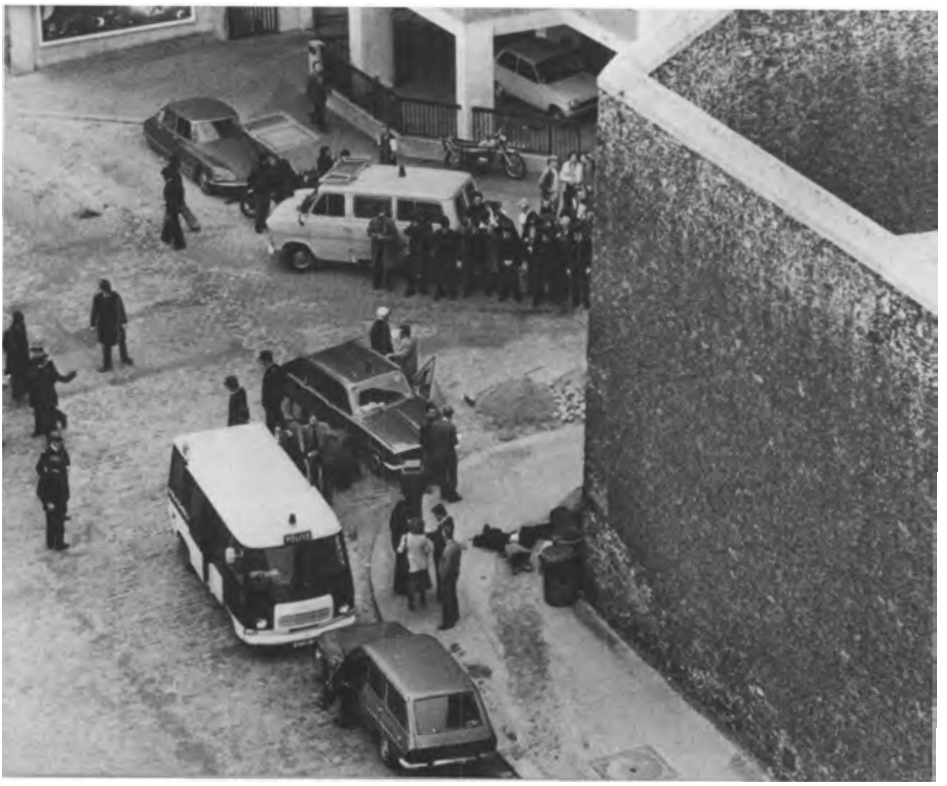
As they approached the inner wall, the workmen obediently carrying the ladder, they encountered a group of two guards and three prisoners, all of whom immediately recognized Mesrine. This could have been disastrous, but neither he nor Besse panicked. They both had guns in their hands and forced the guards and their prisoners to come with them. The metal door in the inner wall provided no difficulty at all: M. Moret had



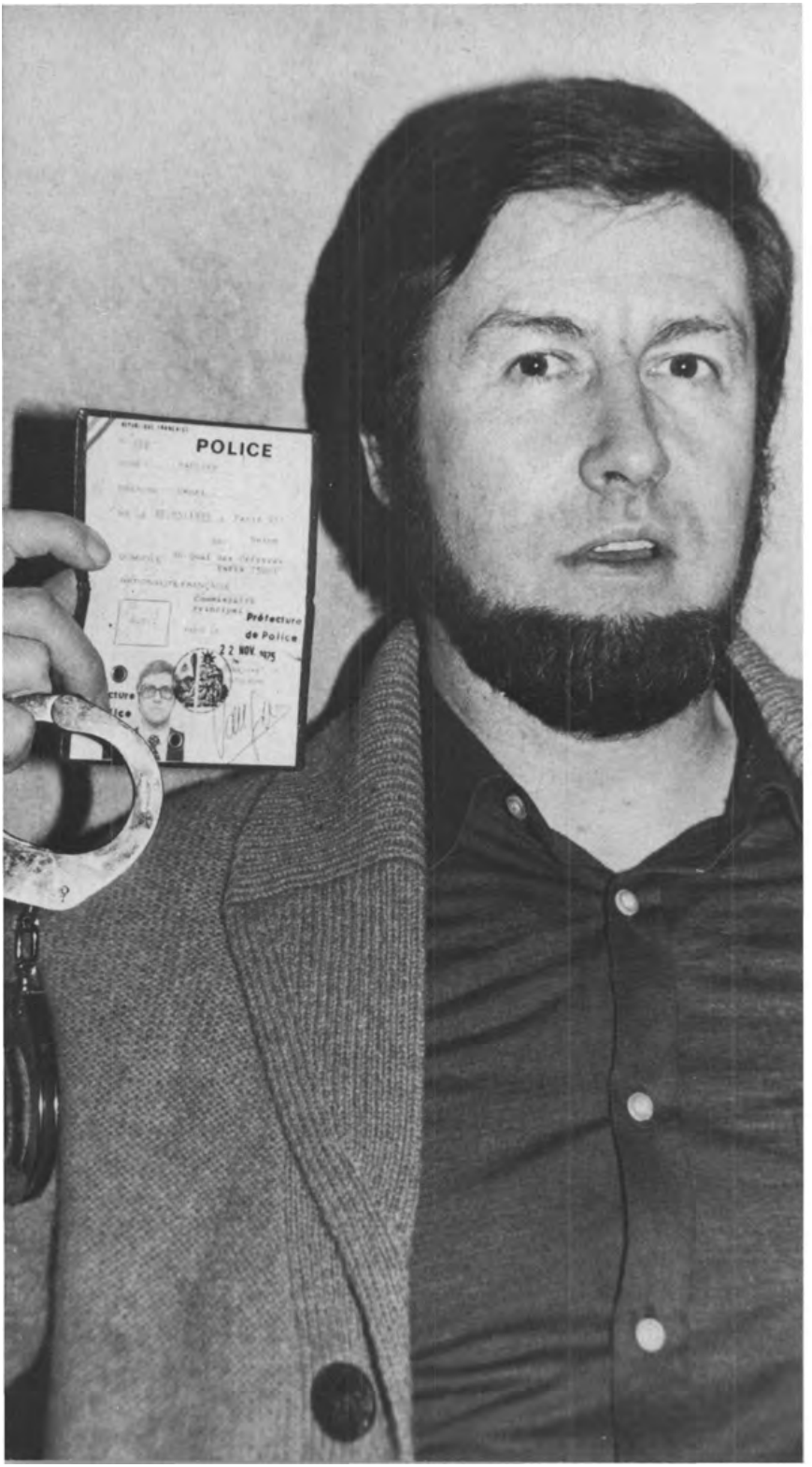
1. Six of the many faces of Jacques Mesrine. (Rex Features)

2. *Above left*. Jacques Mesrine with his young Canadian mistress, Jocelyne Deraiche, in Montreal in 1972. (Rex Features). *Below left*. Jocelyne Deraiche in New York later the same year. (Rex Features) 3. *Above*. Mesrine reading about himself in a Paris magazine. London police were astonished to find a trunkful of press-cuttings about him when they raided one of Mesrine's hideouts. (Rex Features). *Right*. A few of the weapons in Mesrine's possession at the time of his death. (Rex Features)

4. *Above*. Mesrine with three warders inside the prison of La Santé shortly before his escape in 1978. (Rex Features). *Below*. The scene outside La Santé on 8 May 1978, after the escape. The body of Carman Rives is still lying where he fell, at the foot of the wall over which the escapers climbed. (Rex Features)



5. *Above*. Police marksmen in a helicopter in Normandy, hunting for Mesrine after he held up the Deauville casino a fortnight after the breakout from La Santé. (Rex Features). *Below left*. The house in Baron's Court in London where Mesrine and Sylvie Jeanjacquot hid during the autumn of 1978. Their flat was on the first floor. (Rex Features). *Below right*. Jacques Mesrine takes aim. (Alain Bizos)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Préfecture de Police
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6. *Left*. Mesrine with a pair of handcuffs and a police identity card he used bearing a photograph of himself. One of the many mysteries surrounding Mesrine was how he obtained several police and Ministry of Justice passes. (Alain Bizos)
7. *Above and below*. 2 November 1979. (Rex Features)

8. *Above*. The body of Jacques Mesrine is pulled clear from the car in which he was shot. Commissaire Broussard, Mesrine's long-standing adversary, is seen bending towards the dead man. (Rex Features). *Below left*. At the funeral: his mother and one of his sons and (*right*) his daughter with Christiane Giletti, one of Mesrine's many lawyers. (Rex Features)

forgotten to lock it behind him when he came through it that morning.

Only two hazards now remained: a sentry-box just in front of the outer wall, and the wall itself. By another incredible stroke of luck for the escapers, this final sentry, M. Launay, was outside his reinforced, bullet-proof sentry-box, with his rifle slung idly over his back, at the moment when the fugitives and their hostages appeared in front of him. As a rule he was forbidden to leave the sentry-box while on duty. His initial shock at seeing five other warders approaching as he strolled around smoking turned to despair as the largest of the men in uniform walked up to him and said, 'I'm Mesrine. Hand over your gun or I'll kill you.' Passing the rifle to Rives, Mesrine forced the guards to erect the ladder against the wall. Unnoticed, Moret and one of the guards, M. Javaloyas, made a bolt back through the iron door into the main part of the prison and raised the alarm.

Armed men rushed to the scene from both sides of the prison walls. Besse was first up the ladder. He fixed the blue rope to the top of the wall, and swung down the other side. Mesrine gesticulated to Rives to follow – the youth paled, shook his head. He was finally losing his nerve. Seconds were vital. Mesrine climbed up the ladder at speed and squatted on top of the wall. The guards were rushing into the courtyard and firing up at the wall. Mesrine shouted desperately to Rives to follow him. Glancing behind him, Rives ran up the ladder. Relieved, Mesrine grabbed the rope and lowered himself down into freedom. Rives, reaching the ridge of the wall, panicked at the sight of policemen arriving on the scene, and wasted precious seconds firing on them with M. Launay's rifle. He then threw the rifle down to the ground and began the perilous descent on the rope. There were at this time still only two or three policemen on the scene and their surprise at seeing what seemed to be warders lowering themselves by rope over the wall gave Mesrine and Besse vital moments.

Desperately Mesrine fired at the police in an attempt to distract them from Rives. 'Get back – there's been an escape,' he told a woman pushing a pram. Besse, under Mesrine's orders, was racing away from the prison towards a major cross-road just over 100 metres away. Rives had nearly made it – he was swaying wildly, his feet a few feet from the ground. 'Jump! Jump! Mesrine yelled urgently as he ran towards the cross-road, where Besse was stopping a white Renault 20. Carman Rives never

heard him. Several shots rang out. For a second he hung idly on the rope, his head banging against the imposing memorial tablet to eighteen members of the Resistance executed by the Germans inside La Santé during the war: 'Executed on the orders of a government serving the enemy.' Carman Rives made no sound but crumpled and fell to the ground. For a second the policeman who had fired the 7.65, which hit him in the chest, stood still, satisfied.

Mesrine also stared silently for a fraction of a second then, pointing his gun at the driver of the Renault, he ordered him out of the car. Mesrine and Besse leapt in and drove straight across the boulevard St Jacques, a wide tree-lined street which crosses the rue de la Santé. A train rattled along a bridge overhead as the escapers crashed through the red lights, down the straight, narrow road ahead. It looked as though Mesrine had master-minded and carried out the impossible. He and Besse were the first people ever to have escaped from La Santé, 'the great unbustable'. It was 10.25 a.m.

Inside the prison the panic-stricken M. Launay ground a cigarette-butt into the concrete ground with his foot. 'Heads will roll for this!' he remarked sadly to one of the workmen. By 10.40 roadblocks were in place on all the major roads out of Paris. Railway stations and airports were being watched. By 11 o'clock a thousand extra policemen had been drafted into Paris. Police leave was cancelled, and attempts were made to contact those officers who were on holiday and recall them to duty. Someone remembered Madame Giletti. She was found, still in the interview-room, thumbing idly through a sheaf of legal documents. She hadn't even taken off the black raincoat she had been wearing when she arrived. She was immediately taken, under heavily armed guard, to Police Headquarters for interrogation. Why had she not raised the alarm, the police, understandably, wanted to know? Madame Giletti's reaction was, simply, that it was not her job to do so. The prison was supposed to be swarming with guards. She assumed that they would deal with whatever was going on. The police were not satisfied.

Ministry of Justice officials, prison guards, warders, and policemen with guilty consciences were mentally rehearsing their defence. The Commission of Inquiry into the escape was later to discover that of the twenty prison employees who had any involvement with the affair, sixteen were, on that particular Monday, suffering from migraine, overwork or marital prob-

lems! The day that had begun normally inside the prison began to take on an unreal, nightmarish quality for the prison administration: trying to pre-empt external criticism they instituted their own investigation into exactly how the escape had been carried out. The investigators went to the interview-room. There they experienced new horror: not only had Mesrine somehow got hold of the two pistols and the rope he used in the getaway, but he had left an arsenal behind him.

The young official who was standing, as Mesrine had stood, on the table in order to reach the ventilation grill, pulled out, in amazement, a revolver. Then a dagger. He explored the recess further with his hand. Another knife. A hand-grenade. A fuse for a bomb. Another revolver. He handed them one by one to a colleague standing on the floor. 'Well, that's all.' No one smiled. He crouched and steadied himself with one hand on the edge of the table before jumping off. He wiped his hand on his trouser leg. It was obvious from the greasy dust with which he was covered that the ventilation shaft had never before been thoroughly searched. The guns, the knives and the bomb, however, all seemed fairly clean, as if they hadn't been there for long. There was not a man in the room who was unaware of the interpretation that the police and, perhaps worse, the press would put on events. Someone inside the prison, almost certainly a warder, had been smuggling arms in to help Mesrine.

Serge Devos had that day started his new job as head of the Brigade de Répression de Banditisme. After twenty-seven years in the police force he had acquired a considerable reputation for intelligence and thoroughness. Six months before, he had master-minded the arrest of 27-year-old Yugoslavian double-murderer, Milivog Milosavlievic, in the 10e district of Paris, near the Gare de l'Est. It would now be his responsibility to lead the police investigation into the escape of Mesrine and Besse and to organize their recapture.

At 2 p.m., after three hours' interrogation, he stood up and addressed Madame Giletti: 'O.K. We'll leave it at that for now. But if you don't mind I'd like you to stay here for a little while. Officer,' he called to a young man standing in the corner of the room, 'Madame Giletti won't be leaving us just yet.' He was sure that she knew more than she had told him and he wanted to keep her in the building for the time being. One of the problems for Commissaire Devos was that it was difficult to know what he,

personally, could do. The police machinery had swung automatically into action – roadblocks, raids on known underworld houses, all the routine measures. What, apart from being seen to ensure that all these were carried out as swiftly and thoroughly as possible, was there to be done? He had caught escaped convicts before, but in his experience, if they weren't caught in the first twenty-four hours, it could take months. Final success was usually the result of slow, painstaking footwork. And in the case of Mesrine, that wasn't going to be seen to be enough. Already the world's press knew of the escape, and were clamouring for a police statement on the search for Mesrine. It was as if, the criminal having pulled off a massive publicity stunt, the press now wanted the police to 'go one better', to produce a more dramatic counter-move.

At 1 p.m. a note was delivered to Serge Devos from the Minister of Justice. As he read it, Devos's large eyes flickered nervously. He loosened his tie. The media might view the affair as an elaborate sport but the government, it appeared, did not. The Minister of Justice, Alain Peyrefitte, was going to have to give an account of what had happened and how it had happened to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing the next day. He wanted to be able to assure the President that Devos was likely to recapture Mesrine quickly. If Mesrine could be caught within, say, forty-eight hours, then the inefficiency of the prison in allowing him to escape, would be less severely criticized. There would be little sleep for Serge Devos that night.

The body of Carman Rives was still lying where it had fallen at the foot of the outer wall of the prison. Forensic scientists were collecting cartridge cases and bullets from the scene in an attempt to identify from which guns they had been fired. A youth in a white coat was outlining the position of the body on the pavement in white chalk. The area was cordoned off as the inquiry continued. A junior policeman attempted to gather and keep together the few eye-witnesses of the escape, so that they could give official statements of what they had seen. His problem was that more and more people kept joining the group. He could hardly send anyone away who claimed to have seen what had happened, but he could have sworn that there had not been forty people in the quiet backstreet, able to clearly identify the escapers and overhear their conversation.

Throughout the afternoon the work went on at La Santé – collecting reports from the civilian witnesses, the prison staff

and the police, and interviewing prisoners, especially those who were known to have disliked Mesrine. Was there any intelligence within the convict community about where he might have hidden after the escape? The switchboard at Police Headquarters had been jammed since the first television and radio news-flash told of the escape, with calls from people who had seen Mesrine. By two o'clock he was, apparently, in Monte Carlo, Marseilles, Strasbourg, Amiens and Bordeaux. The name and address of each caller was painstakingly recorded, together with the exact time and place of each sighting. Each one had to be relayed to the local police force concerned, who were already having trouble dealing with the sightings that were being reported directly to them.

News about Mesrine dominated French television and radio stations. No one yet knew exactly how he had managed to escape, so the public had to be satisfied with old stories about his previous exploits.

Mesrine had safely reached the flat that had been made ready for him near Les Invalides. He had abandoned the stolen car at about 11 o'clock in the rue André Theunet, five minutes' drive away from his previous address, after dropping François Besse at a flat in the avenue Jean Moulin. When Mesrine arrived at his hideout, the first thing he asked for was a glass of wine. He then moved the portable colour television set into the carpeted bathroom, balanced it on the bidet, switched it on and began to fill the bath. The man who had rented the flat was amazed when, a few seconds later, Mesrine came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped round him and rather diffidently asked whether he might use some of the Floris bath essence that was there. 'Imagine,' he says, 'the most famous criminal in France politely asking to borrow my bath-oil! And then I cooked us a steak and salad, and opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate Mesrine's safe arrival, and he insisted on doing the washing-up!'

Mesrine's 'host' was about seventy. He no longer lived in Paris, but had agreed to rent this flat in his own name some six weeks before. He had, of course, been aware of the risks he was running in agreeing to help a convicted criminal: if discovered, he would end up in prison himself. However, he found Mesrine so charming that, he says, 'it became a pleasure to do all I could for this gentle-mannered and kind man'.

It is not known whether Besse stayed at the flat in the avenue

Jean Moulin for some time, or whether he had accomplices there who helped him to move around Paris. It had been agreed between the two escapers that they should split up as soon as possible. Mesrine had said that two needles sticking to each other are easier to find in a haystack than one. The old underworld adage that a man can hide anywhere if he has money was understood by them both. However, neither of them had enough. For a while they could rely on friends and accomplices. But it was better to be independent, better that none of the people who helped them should know enough about their movements to betray them, either intentionally or accidentally.

In retracing the movements of Mesrine during any of the periods when he was on the run, it is clear that none of the people who seem to have been involved in helping him knew very much about the activities of the others who also did so. There are rumours, of course, always rumours, but unless and until one gets to the man who was there, who saw what happened, they remain insubstantial and ghostly.

Mesrine's insistence on remaining independent was to keep him alive, against all the odds, for eighteen months. But he needed cash. He had considerable respect and trust for Besse, and they decided to work together. They arranged to meet to discuss a 'job' either on the Friday evening, four and a half days after their escape, in a small, rather shabby café at the Porte de Saint-Ouen, or if they failed to meet there, on Saturday afternoon at 'La Rotonde', a smart bar in Montparnasse. Both were near Métro stations that Mesrine could reach from Les Invalides without changing trains. He enjoyed the Métro and believed that it was the safest way to travel round Paris. Besse hated public transport and refused to use it. His desire to live well had driven him to crime in the first place. It would be futile to have risked so much only to have to travel in a smelly train full of people. He preferred to borrow or steal cars, or to travel by taxi.

At 10 a.m. on Tuesday morning, the day after the escape, Hubert Bonaldi, the Governor of La Santé, was standing in front of a large metal filing-cabinet. On a table beside him was a small pile of papers. He withdrew a final sheet of paper from the drawer, added it to the pile and slammed the drawer shut.

He was preparing to defend himself.

Document number one
Ref. 735/HB/CD 16 March 1978

The Governor of the prison of La Santé to the Minister of Justice and the Prison Administration office.

With reference to Mesrine (Jacques). It has been brought to my notice during a telephone conversation with District Commissioner Bizeul of the Crimes Squad that reliable information has been received concerning the above named, Jacques Mesrine, at the moment detained in the top-security wing of this prison, suggesting that an attempt is to be made to help him escape, between three weeks and three months from this date.

This information has been received thanks to recent collaboration between the police forces of France and Quebec, during investigations into the matter of a murder allegedly committed by Mesrine in Canada (of two gamekeepers), described by Mesrine himself in his book 'L'Instinct de Mort'. According to this information a group of his known associates has been approached with a view to their helping in the projected escape.

It would be carried out by means of the capture of hostages inside and outside the prison, in a manner similar to that outlined in a document found in the possession of Martine Cabanes, the mistress of the criminal Willoquet, on whose help Mesrine was relying in planning his escape . . .

A change has also been observed in Mesrine's morale. He appears to be less resigned to his sentence and at the same time he appears to be training himself physically, as if he was eager to get into 'condition' . . .

Signed Hubert Bonaldi.
Governor of the Prison.

Document number two:
From Jean Fagianelli, Deputy Governor of La Santé Prison to the Director of Prison Administration
Request for the immediate transfer of the prisoner Mesrine (Jacques) for the following reasons:

1. A telephone call from Sabrina Mesrine, daughter of the criminal, requesting permission for an extra visit: 'I need to talk to my father urgently.'

2. The ambiguous text of a telegram from this same Sabrina: 'Have sought advice and received much help.'

3. A letter which Mesrine attempted to smuggle out which has been intercepted in which the gangster was writing to a friend about the renting of a flat.

20th April

Document number three was the transcript of the anonymous telephone call to Jean Fagianelli (see page 125).

Document number four:
From the Director of La Santé Prison to the Director of Prison Administration
With reference to the physical condition of the prisoners Mesrine (Jacques), Besse (François) and Rives (Carman).

'I have observed that Mesrine and Besse have been concentrating on their physical fitness.

They don't allow themselves to rest during their exercise periods.

They have been seen performing press-ups in their cells.

Both look extremely fit.

They're behaving like men who have just had some good news.'

Signed – Hubert Bonaldi 25th April 1978

He sent photocopies of the documents to the Ministry of Justice and to the Director of Prison Administration. But it didn't do him much good. Mesrine's showmanship and the public interest in him had made his escape a matter of political significance. His recapture was vital if the French penal system was to retain any credibility. One prisoner such as Mesrine, known by everyone in France for his daring, skill, bravado and sheer good luck successfully escaping was more detrimental to the good name of the Ministry of Justice than a hundred dull, anonymous thieves managing to find their way illicitly out of the government's prisons.

The police investigation continued. They visited every address in the country where it was known that a colleague/friend/lover/enemy or relation of Mesrine lived or had ever lived. Throughout Tuesday and Wednesday they carried on. The police knew that Mesrine had on more than one occasion planned to escape from La Santé with the help of Canadian criminal friends. Every Canadian passport-holder in France was checked: those with criminal records were interviewed. None of it yielded anything. The police felt that they were up against a

wall of steel. It was if the two men had evaporated into thin air. Dozens of helpful caretakers had reported men who had come to live recently in or near their buildings – none of them proved to be an escaped convict although several of them were discovered to be on the missing-persons list. Someone had to know where Mesrine and Besse were hiding, but no one was talking.

Only months later did the slightest cracks begin to appear in Mesrine's security. As time passed the snippets of information, mostly innocuous in themselves, began to form a picture. The detail never was and never will be completely distinguishable.

Madame Giletti had spent two nights at the Quai des Orfèvres, and had been questioned endlessly. She said nothing to incriminate herself and remained calm and charming. She had to be released: a scandal about the brutality of the police towards a much-liked, a middle-aged woman, would not help them at all at the moment. As she left the Police Headquarters she walked straight into a crowd of photographers and sympathetic journalists.

Serge Devos barely slept during his first week as head of the B.R.B. He liaised with Mesrine's old antagonist, Commissaire Broussard, head of the Brigade de Recherche et d'Intervention (B.R.I.). It was Broussard who had arrested Mesrine in September 1973. Both were public heroes – the super-cop and the super-robber. The press, reflecting public opinion, seemed pleased that the super-robber had won a round. They had been delighted several years previously when Mesrine, finding himself surrounded by Broussard's men, congratulated his adversary and offered him a glass of champagne. But now the terms of the battle appeared to have altered.

In several letters to the press in the last few years, Mesrine had made it clear that in his campaign against the top-security wings in the French prisons he would stop at nothing. He had told the world, or as much of it as he could reach, that he was willing to kill if necessary, to bring pressure on the government to improve conditions in those quarters. He had declared war on the judiciary of France. And it was the job of the police to catch him. But they seemed curiously unable to do so. 'There are lessons to be drawn from this affair,' announced Alain Peyrefitte, the Minister of Justice. 'Lessons to be drawn and measures to be taken.'

In an elegant empire-style office high over the place Vendôme a

robust, immaculately dressed 58-year-old man sat at his desk. Pierre Aymard had been the Director of Prison Administration since 1976. His telephone rang. The call was on the internal line.

'This is the Chief Secretary's office of the Ministry of Justice. It is my duty . . .' He knew the rest already, although he hadn't been told. He was no longer in charge. He thanked the caller and hung up. The telephone rang again. It was an old friend, calling to sympathize. He had only heard the news an hour ago, and had called as soon as he could. He was really very sorry . . .

Jacques Mesrine had been waiting in the café for Besse for half an hour. He still had not turned up. Bored, Mesrine had walked over to a rather thin and sad-looking youth who had had too much to drink. He had been trying to persuade a workman, who was obviously tired and wanted only to read his newspaper, that keeping animals in cages was a great evil. Entertained by the scene of the animated but pathetic little drunkard, and the poor workman trying very hard not to be bothered by him, Mesrine picked up his beer from the counter where he had been standing, and went to sit with the ill-matched pair. He sat down and was immediately accosted by the eager youth, who continued to proclaim the immorality of zoos, circuses and even pet shops. Gratefully the workman retired behind his newspaper. It is tempting to imagine that what so absorbed him was the story of the escape from La Santé. After a moment or two, during which, the youth was to say afterwards, he began to feel calmed by the presence of this friendly and benevolent big man, the stranger interrupted him. He completely agreed with what the boy said – cruelty to animals was something he refused to tolerate. But he thought it even more outrageous that the government of France, the most civilized nation on earth, demanded that men should be locked up in circumstances as cruel as those suffered by any animal. The youth agreed. He was delighted and surprised that this urbane and articulate stranger was taking an interest in him.

After ten minutes Mesrine told the youth that he had to go, but suggested that they should have a drink together the next week. It was clear to him that the boy would be easy to manipulate. And it would be useful to have someone willing to work for him who did not know who he was. This obscure Parisian was later to gain a single brief moment of notoriety. For the moment, he looked forward to his next meeting with his new friend.

Mesrine left the café and wandered around the neighbourhood, asking in shops and bars whether anyone knew of a flat to let. He was directed by a man he met to a nearby house, where there might be an empty flat. Mesrine went there at once. That same afternoon 'M. Lenoir' paid three months' rent in advance, and was given the key to a ground-floor studio flat at number 124, impasse Charles-Albert. He was, the neighbours learnt, a businessman from Nice, the father of five children. He travelled a lot on business and needed a *pied-à-terre* in Paris. The landlord was delighted with the deal – the new tenant hadn't argued at all about the rent, 'such a nice man', and not at all the type to go off without paying the rent.

Mesrine was also delighted with the deal. Although he was very comfortable in the flat near Les Invalides, and he had been told that he could stay there as long as he liked (and had paid two months' rent), he was not a man who had ever been happy with only one address. Now, with two flats, he felt much safer. He also had a new friend, usefully naïve and impressionable, living near his new flat.

The following day he and Besse worked out the details of their next job.

12

The search for Mesrine went on. Reports came in from all over France that he had been seen. In Parliament and in the press the incompetence of the prison officials and the police was discussed endlessly. The new men in charge of the prisons claimed that they were investigating the security failure and that far-reaching reforms would be implemented. The police were aggrieved at the criticism. They were doing what they could. By now, however, that was not much more than to keep everyone whom Mesrine might contact under surveillance.

Sabrina Mesrine was furious to see police marksmen lying on the roofs of buildings surrounding her home. Commissaire Devos, in charge of the search, realized that his men were losing confidence. Frequent announcements were made to the press that the police had received a great deal of valuable information and were going to be able to announce Mesrine's recapture very soon. Privately, the policemen working on the case were becom-

ing increasingly convinced that Mesrine and Besse had slipped out of the country. It was the only explanation: there was not a single shred of evidence that either of them had been in France after 8 May, the day of the escape. It was obvious to anyone that the sensible thing for them to do would be to go abroad – in France their photographs were still in the newspapers almost every day. Photographs of the two criminals, and copies of their fingerprints, were transmitted, through Interpol, to countries all over the world. Several senior policemen hastily visited other European countries to discuss the case with foreign police forces, and help investigate reported sightings of the two men. A number of those sounded promising: they had been 'seen' in a London nightclub, in a casino in Germany, on the beach in Italy, and in a backstreet in Athens. But none of them could be verified; there was never any evidence.

Devos realized that he was going to have to be seen to change the direction of the investigation. He decided to concentrate the search for a while in Normandy. Given that Mesrine couldn't be in Paris – that would be suicidally dangerous – the next most likely place, in France, for him to hide was Normandy. Mesrine knew the area like the back of his hand. Even more interesting to the police was the fact that Mesrine was known to have loyal friends and criminal associates in the area, and hidden there successfully for some time in 1973. Despite their intuition that he might not be in France at all, the police plunged wholeheartedly into their new campaign. It would improve their image if they were seen to be energetically pursuing Mesrine, even if they didn't succeed in catching him.

They began making spot-checks on motorists in the area – stopping cars at random and asking to see the drivers' papers, and then checking that the car was not stolen. They started house-to-house investigations in the main towns. Endlessly the police knocked on doors – they showed householders photographs of Mesrine and Besse and their known accomplices. It appeared that he spent a great deal of time lurking in bushes near the houses of elderly spinsters, looking menacing. Special patrol groups worked in the countryside, searching disused buildings, outhouses, barns, cattle sheds, finding nothing and upsetting the livestock. Every police informer was mobilized to gather any underworld rumours. Junior policemen grew fitter, senior policemen grew more anxious, and no one learnt anything.

It was now 16 May, eight days since the 'great escape'. Paris

was beginning to settle down again after the excitement. Mesrine, everyone agreed, had done the impossible – he had escaped from La Santé. But now life had to go on: it was business as usual and conversation turned to other subjects.

In a small gunsmith's almost opposite the Gare de l'Est, the conversation turned, as it often did, to pigeons, ducks, rabbits and pheasants. The shop reflected the growing middle-class interest in shooting – it was not an exclusive, aristocrat establishment such as a Paris gunsmith might have been thirty years ago, but a relaxed, friendly place where people came in to buy a shotgun and stopped for a chat. It was 10.15 a.m. The first clients had left. The shop was empty, and owner, Alain Buisson, was polishing and rearranging the stock, while his brother Jacky tidied the window-display. The door opened and in walked two men in blue anoraks. The taller man was clean-shaven with short hair, and was wearing a cream-coloured peaked cap. The smaller one was about twenty-five with dark hair and olive skin He was carrying a brown-leather sports bag.

The taller one asked for a pair of handcuffs. M. Buisson wondered why they wanted them, but as he sometimes sold handcuffs to gamekeepers, for detaining poachers or to teachers for school plays, he wasn't too perturbed. He bent down to the drawer where they were kept, and stood up, holding a pair of standard handcuffs of the type he sold most often. As he glanced up at his customers, he saw the barrel of a .38 Smith and Wesson level with his forehead. Jacky had his hands in the air and a 7.65 was pointing at him. Swiftly the taller man snatched the handcuffs, indicated to the two terrified gunsmiths that they should move closer to each other, and with a deft movement, clicked their wrists together. He then browsed around the shop, picking up whatever he wanted, while his accomplice covered the shopkeepers. Outside in the square two old men were sitting and arguing amiably in the late spring sunshine. A stream of housewives went in to the bakery next door, and came out carrying long loaves of bread for their husband's and children's lunches. For once, Alain Buisson prayed that no one would come into his shop, knowing that if they did it could only result in someone being shot.

The larger gangster, who appeared to be the boss, went to the till and removed 20,000 francs. He then spent some time considering the relative merits of different types of gun: picking them up, feeling how heavy they were, looking through the

sights, releasing the safety-catches. The shopkeeper realized that he knew a lot about guns. He took his time to decide which weapons he wanted, but finally chose two Smith and Wesson 9 mm. pistols, eight large calibre revolvers and 700 rounds of ammunition. He loaded the two pistols and stuck them into his belt, putting the rest into his accomplice's sports bag along with the cash. 'Right, that's it,' he said, pulling one of the pistols out of his belt. The Buisson brothers thought he was going to kill them, but he simply slipped the gun into the bag with the others, and made for the door. He warned the Buissons, still attached to each other, not to inform the police for at least an hour, that the raid had taken place. Leaving the shop the gangsters casually strolled off towards the main-line station. So shaken were the shopkeepers that they waited for over forty minutes before dialling 17 – the emergency signal for the police.

The crime had been smoothly and professionally carried out. The police called to 125, rue de Faubourg St Martin to investigate wondering, half in jest, whether it might have been perpetrated by Mesrine. They reproached themselves for their paranoia, and reminded themselves that the police, at least, should retain a sense of proportion. The press might imagine Mesrine under every bed, and responsible for every pick-pocketing in France, but it wouldn't do if the police began to react in the same way. Not even Mesrine would be idiotic enough to be in the centre of Paris with so many policemen looking for him, let alone to break into a shop in a main road in broad daylight. There was, however, one slightly disconcerting fact: Mesrine was known to have bought a rifle from this shop in 1973 and he was a creature of habit, often returning to the scene of an earlier crime, or choosing to move in areas he knew. The police showed the Buissons photographs of Mesrine and Besse, ones that had often been shown on television and in the newspapers. The Buissons didn't think they were really very like the men who had robbed them, although it was difficult to tell: it was rather dark inside the shop and the taller man had been wearing a cap.

It was only later, after a crime which dwarfed the Buisson raid into insignificance, that the police had to admit that the cool professional thief had in fact been Mesrine. And they had no clues as to where he would turn up next.

Outside the police station in Deauville, a fashionable resort in Normandy, a tricolour flag hung limply on its flagpole. It was

just before 11 p.m. on 27 May, ten days after the raid on the gunsmith's shop. Two men bounded up the six shallow stone steps, taking them two at a time, and went into the half-timbered gabled building; it looked more like a children's story-book cottage than a police station. Mesrine led the way purposefully through the pretty, mosaic-floored hall into the wood-panelled public reception area. The police station was characteristic of the town, abnormally clean, and picturesquely decorated, with rural archaic carved oak furniture. The local police force, however, was neither rural nor archaic. They were well aware of the constant threat of kidnapping that hangs over many of the town's super-rich visitors, as well as the temptation that the magnificent villas in the area, belonging to some of the wealthiest people in Europe, must present to other enterprising citizens who yearn for a life of comfortable leisure.

There is also the problem of the casino, grand, elegant, timeless, where great fortunes have been lost and won, and which had already been burgled three times in six months before Mesrine's escape from prison. The Ministry of Justice is unwilling to reveal just how many policemen there are in any particular town (for obvious reasons) but it is clear even to the casual visitor that there are more of them on the streets of Deauville than in most small towns. That evening there were two officers on reception duty and six more walking into the parade room just as the criminals arrived.

'I am Inspector Dorner, from the Gaming Squad,' Mesrine addressed one young officer, who immediately stood up. 'I want the Duty Inspector.'

'He's not here.'

'All right. I'll see him another day.' The 'Inspector' and his companion walked out. They hadn't given any proof of their identity, but, as the young officer explained afterwards, they behaved and talked like policemen: it hadn't occurred to him to question them. It was about five minutes after they had left that the colour suddenly drained from his face. 'That man was Mesrine,' he gasped. The other policemen on duty reassured him that it couldn't have been. 'No, no, you're going mad. Inspector Dorner was taller and younger than that shit. Anyway, Mesrine will be out of the country by now. Calm down.'

Meanwhile, Mesrine and Besse were walking briskly down the rue Désiré le Hoc towards the casino. There had been no point in the visit to the police station. It had been an act of bravado, a

deliberate gesture of defiance towards the police, a carefully planned addition to the Mesrine legend. As he contemplated accounts of it in the next day's newspapers, he grew increasingly ebullient. Even Besse, who had argued passionately against the visit to the police station was now feeling elated. All had begun well. The rest would follow.

The massive casino building looming up before them did nothing to dispel their euphoria. On the contrary, to the discerning eye the whole town of Deauville invites burglary. Nothing in it is ordinary, everything is designed to entertain the eye – petrol stations look like stables, hotels like gingerbread houses. It is a toy-town for the super-rich, and the heart of the town is the casino.

Under the brilliant lights of the main gaming-room about sixty pairs of eyes silently watched the turning of the wheels. Though the women might be duchesses and the men kings-in-exile, here there was no established order, no fixed hierarchy. The world of dedicated gamblers is curiously monastic – the obsession with, and faith in, an irrational machine or a pack of cards obscures other interests and distractions. Then there are the rich, who come in and play casually for an hour or two, uninvolved in the great mystery, oblivious to the presence of the magical force, whose altar is the baize table, and whose priest is the croupier. There are also the tourists, who cannot afford to gamble for high stakes, but who are attracted by the glamour and possible chance of easy riches.

May is not the most fashionable time in Deauville. Most of those at the tables at 11 p.m. were the faithful.

By the entrance to the gaming-room sat the 'physiognomist'. His job was to watch everyone who came in, and refuse entry to the undesirable – gamblers known not to pay their debts, thieves, and the 'offensively' poor. The principal requirements for the job are a photographic memory for faces and that sixth sense which warns when a person is not what he seems to be, or is not what he hopes he seems to be. In May 1978 the physiognomist at Deauville was a M. Bretagne, a small, dapper man with slicked-back hair. He thinks that it was about 11.50 p.m. when two strangers approached him. One of them flashed an official-looking card with a red, white and blue band across it, and said 'Marcel Villard, Ministry of Justice. I'd like to talk to M. Gilbert' (the director of the casino). M. Bretagne informed him briskly that the director wasn't there. Mesrine then insisted on

seeing the gaming-director, M. Marzin, who turned up within a few seconds. He began a conversation with him about some gambling cheat the Ministry of Justice were looking for and then drew him aside for a moment.

M. Bretagne was surprised to see the supposed government official open his jacket to show M. Marzin two pistols that were stuck into his belt. Mesrine suddenly demanded that the physiognomist and the gaming-director should accompany him to the Cashier's Office. Marzin realized that Besse, who had said not a word so far, was clutching a gun inside his jacket pocket. M. Bretagne refused to follow the gangsters. 'You don't give me orders. And take your cap off inside the casino.' Astonishingly, Mesrine obediently did so, stuffing it into his right pocket. Quietly the two gangsters and M. Marzin made their way to the Cashier's Office. Mesrine withdrew a gun from his belt and demanded money. Without a word the cashier piled bundle after bundle of bank notes into a sports bag which Besse had obligingly opened on the counter in front of him. Mesrine even went behind the desk to make sure that nothing had been overlooked or hidden, while Besse stood in front of the counter, rocking awkwardly from one foot to the other.

Around the nearest table fifteen feet away in the gaming room, the gamblers were absorbed in their game. Only one person in the room, a young girl who wasn't playing, watched the other drama. She noticed how pale the gaming-director and the cashier looked, and was a little surprised to see the cashier unceremoniously dumping money on the counter. But she knew better than to interrupt the concentration of the gamblers and just wondered to herself what was going on.

In a low voice, Mesrine, having already taken all the money there was to be had, addressed the cashier quietly, fixing him with a hard stare. 'I'm Mesrine. You have, of course, heard of me?' This was the final straw for the cashier. He collapsed, literally, sliding slowly down out of his chair. It was the third time the cashier had been robbed while he was on duty. The first time he was hit over the head, the second time the police believed that he was involved in the conspiracy and now, here was Mesrine! For the poor man it was just all too much. Just as Mesrine was savouring the effect of the legend, into the creation of which he had put so much time and energy, an unseen finger pushed a button. In the police station, which Mesrine had left only half an hour earlier, a red light flashed

repeatedly and a high-pitched continuous siren brought every man in the building clattering downstairs, and alerted every patrol car in the Deauville area.

Besse carried the loot and Mesrine whispered to Marzin, who found himself being used as a hostage, as they made their way quietly to the door of the casino. The gaming-director, with the barrel of a pistol nudging a little too hard for comfort under his ribs, was warned not to alert the police for twenty minutes. They had a car waiting for them, a white Simca Rally which they had stolen earlier in the evening. They had the money. They would quickly be able to melt away into the Normandy countryside.

It was with a sense of relief that the two gangsters emerged from the casino into the velvet air of the May night. The first thing they saw was a police car containing armed policemen drawing up alongside the casino. Mesrine immediately opened fire, shooting above their heads, and began to make a run for the car. Bullets flew. The police were aiming to kill. More police cars were approaching from either end of the boulevard Cornuché, the nonchalantly elegant main street in Deauville. The government had taught Mesrine twenty years before, in Algeria, to run through gunfire and keep his head down. Instinctively, he did so now, throwing himself into the stolen car, starting the engine, and hauling Besse in after him as he took off. Besse had been hit in the arm and was losing a lot of blood, but he managed to fire a few bullets out of the window at the police. Two police cars were approaching them, one on the right side of the road, one on the left. At 75 m.p.h. Mesrine drove between them, infuriating the police, who caught a glimpse of him laughing as they flashed by. Reaching the end of the boulevard Cornuché, and turning noisily and on two wheels at a right angle into the rue Mirabeau, he suddenly braked and turned right into a small road leading back towards the casino. He then began to cruise along at a steady 30 m.p.h. In his rear mirror he caught sight of half a dozen police cars noisily hustling on down the rue Mirabeau.

A minute or two later Mesrine turned the Simca round, and drove back up to the rue Mirabeau, turning right. He was now following the police cars. Evidently the police were expecting him to make for the Mornay countryside: at the Pont de Belges, the bridge which joins Deauville to its poorer twin, Trouville, only two of the police cars took the road for Paris. The others took the main road through Trouville, still wailing and flashing.

Keeping a respectable distance behind his pursuers, Mesrine crossed the bridge, turned slowly into the heart of Trouville and left the town by a minor road. By midnight the police cars were circling aimlessly, having to admit that they had lost him. Roadblocks were set up all over Normandy. Commissaire Broussard was woken in his bed by a telephone call, and drove to Deauville to begin the investigation into the crime.

Police reinforcements poured into Deauville in four full air-conditioned coaches.

Ten minutes after Mesrine and Besse had left the casino, their car stalled, just outside the little town of Cormeilles. There was no time to formulate a complicated plan: the only hope was for them to keep moving and deal with hazards as they encountered them. Abandoning the bullet-ridden, blood-stained car, with Mesrine's white cap and a cheap thriller which the lawful owner was later to insist that he had not left in the car, the fugitives walked 200 yards down the road, clutching the brown sports bag, to where another Simca, a blue 1000 was parked. It wasn't locked.

As they headed towards Orbec, Mesrine was anxious to keep his companion awake. As far as he could see, Besse's arm was still bleeding, and he had begun to vomit. Mesrine turned on the radio, tried several different channels and switched it off in disgust. None of them seemed yet to be telling France of his latest coup.

They travelled through the darkened Normandy lanes, past the shadows of thatched cottages and pretty farms. They gathered speed. Ahead of them was a light on the road. Cautiously Mesrine dipped his headlights. In horror he realized that he was not about to encounter a chance motorist, but a police road-block. Glancing at Besse, he put his foot down and braced himself. François was feverish and weak: it would be useless to ask him to fire at the police. Two young policemen with guns over their shoulders appeared in the middle of the road, gesturing him to stop. As he crashed straight through, they jumped out of the way, and then turned to fire at him. Three bullets pierced the rear windscreen, miraculously flying past Mesrine and Besse. Other bullets slashed into a tyre, and into the gear-box, locking the car in top gear. The car hobbled on, Mesrine driving fast so that the car wouldn't stall. Swerving round a corner at 80 m.p.h. he momentarily lost control, and the car crashed into a steep grass bank.

They were at La Folletière, only about three miles from the roadblock. Besse was hardly capable of walking and Mesrine was not feeling strong enough to carry him far. Together they staggered over two fields, cluthing the sports bag, like a terrible parody of a children's three-legged race. Gently Mesrine lowered the small man into a relatively comfortable position under an oak tree at the edge of an apple orchard. He sat down to gather his strength, and to consider what they should do next. With horror he became aware of a clacking sound overhead: the police had brought helicopters into the area to search for them. They would have to spend the night where they were and move on the next day. Besse was soon unconscious. Mesrine examined the contents of the sports bag. 13,000 francs. It was not as much as he had expected, but it would do. At dawn a white mist hung over the apple orchard. Mesrine realized that he must have slept a little. He turned to examine Besse, who seemed to be in rather better condition. He was still asleep, but his breathing was regular and his forehead felt cool and dry.

The whole country was waking up, and being told by the broadcasting stations of Mesrine's spectacular crime. A police statement said that he had taken 7000 francs, and that it was now only a matter of time before he would be re-arrested. This time there was no doubt that the author of the crime was Mesrine. Not only had M. Bretagne and M. Marzin identified him from photographs, but the Ministry of Justice identity card he flashed so confidently at the casino staff was one he had confiscated from a warder while on his way out of La Santé.

Hundreds of policemen who had been on duty on Friday night volunteered to go on working all through Saturday. They knew that either Mesrine or Besse was wounded, or perhaps they both were. They knew that they had had to abandon two cars. This time escape was impossible. Naturally no one wanted to miss the end, the final triumph. The area was saturated with police. There were roadblocks everywhere, and a hundred individual motor-bike patrols scoured the lanes and footpaths.

Somehow, under these difficult conditions, Mesrine and Besse managed to cover quite a lot of ground that day – about ten miles. Because of the helicopters, the armoured jeeps, the motor-bikes and the foot patrols, the criminals had to travel in fits and starts, looking all round them to make sure there was no one in sight, and then making a dash for the next clump of trees or ditch or barn.

Commissaire Broussard arrived from Paris to take charge of the inquiry locally.

By Saturday night the criminals were both very weak. Mesrine had bought some bread and sausages, and some cigarettes for Besse, but that was eight hours ago. They agreed that it was better that they should not attempt to travel in broad daylight until they had had a chance to steal some fresh clothes, as François's shirt and jacket were both blood-stained. Mesrine began to worry that they might be wandering round in circles. They had to avoid main roads for obvious reasons, and travelling across country, it was difficult to retain a sense of direction, especially after a whole day without proper food or rest.

At dawn, on Sunday, a railway-worker was taking his dog for a walk along the footpath beside the river Charentonne. 'Suddenly I saw two men, one big and one small, walking down the old railway line from Bernay to Broglie. They looked tired and unshaven and rather dirty. One of them seemed to have hurt his arm. I asked them if they were all right. The bigger one said that they had had a breakdown and that their wives were in the car. They said that they were going to get a mechanic. I thought there was something peculiar about them and then I remembered the hold-up at Deauville, so I called the police.'

Within a quarter of an hour two dozen armed policeman had arrived from Bernay. It sounded from the man's description as if he had encountered the fugitives. They must have been very close, but the police failed to find them.

Just over an hour later Mesrine pushed open the door of a small caravan standing in a farmyard near Saint Aubin-le-Vertueux. Inside a sixteen-year-old farm-hand was washing over a tin bowl. 'Two men came in, waving guns. They told me if I obeyed I wouldn't get hurt. They asked who was in the farmhouse. I told them. They waited in my caravan until they saw M. Lelodet, the farmer, go into the milking shed. Then they took me over to the house, sticking a gun in my back.'

The farm-house was warm and comfortable. In the kitchen Mme Lelodet, a buxom and homely countrywoman, was pouring hot chocolate into four bowls, for herself and her three children. 'The children are having breakfast, I see. Good. Well, we'll all have breakfast together,' said the man who introduced himself as Jacques Mesrine. Terrified for the safety of her children, the farmer's wife offered the men bread and chocolate. The smaller man asked whether she had any coffee. She was

making some for him when her husband, Daniel, walked in, expecting a quiet family breakfast. Mesrine reached out towards his gun, without picking it up from the table, and explained who he was. He said he and Besse would need to stay there for three days. The farmer sat down and accepted a bowl from his wife. He wouldn't, of course, dream of refusing to help them, he began, but there were several problems. There was no food in the house. His parents were expecting to see him for lunch in Paris, and he had planned to do a lot of shopping for his wife on the way back. He added that his young assistant was supposed to be competing in a trotting race at Caen that afternoon. If either of them failed to turn up, people would be very suspicious.

Mesrine thought for a moment or two. 'All right. But we need a bath, a shave, and clean clothes.'

Soon afterwards the boy was allowed to leave for Caen. He had been effectively convinced that to say a word of what had happened would be to sign a death warrant not only for the Lelodet family, but for himself.

Madame Lelodet and her daughter were told to stay at the farm. Mesrine and Besse took her two small sons with them as they forced the driver to set out towards Paris. At 11 a.m., on a deserted stretch of road, they told him to stop the car and they got out. M. Lelodet saw them climb slowly over a gate, and begin to walk around the edge of a field. He did not dare inform the police of what had happened until 10 o'clock that night. Mesrine's luck was holding. It was later discovered that the spot where he and Besse had got out of the car was only a few hundred yards from a site where a local police rally was being held! Again the two men disappeared.

By evening a thick fog had come down. It was impossible to see three feet ahead. The fog was cold, wet and opaque. It saved Mesrine's life. Since the Lelodets had reported their encounter with the gangsters, Commissaire Broussard had arrived in the small town of Jenfosse, six miles away. At 11.30 p.m. he was in the police station briefing fifty specially trained men who had been brought in to help in the search. At that moment Mesrine was thirty yards away, unmooring a rowing-boat. He threw in the brown sports bag, held the boat steady while Besse got in and sat down, and then jumped in after him. Mesrine pulled the oars towards him, and the boat swung slowly away from the river bank.

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Within three hours Mesrine and Besse had reached a 'safe house'. At Port-Villez they had abandoned the rowing-boat and stolen a car. It seems that the car they stole was already stolen, and therefore their theft was not reported. The trail of stolen vehicles, which had been relatively easy for the police to follow, was thereby broken. Mesrine drove to the house of a friend who had known that he was planning to rob the casino at Deauville and was expecting him to turn up. The twice-stolen car was then driven by someone else to a spot some distance awayand dumped.

There was food and drink waiting for them, but all that either of them wanted was to go to bed. It was most unusual for Jacques not to insist on giving an account of a successful crime to the first people he saw afterwards. After two nights in the open, the idea of being able to sleep properly in a clean warm bed, was more attractive than anything else. The friend they were staying with had heard a misinformed report on the radio that both criminals had been wounded. He had therefore asked a former medical student (who had subsequently turned to crime) to come and treat them. By the time Mesrine and Besse turned up he had been there more than twenty-four hours.

François was by this time in a very bad state, weak from loss of blood and feverish from exposure. He had been semi-delirious for the last few hours, just managing to muster enough strength to move when they had to. He was sweating profusely and would doze for a few minutes from time to time; then he would wake and would rave incoherently. As they had been driving away from Port-Villez Mesrine had had to stop the car once or twice to calm Besse down. He seemed to be having nightmares and in his distress he became quite violent, waving his arms about so that Mesrine felt unsafe driving beside him. But all that Jacques was able to do was to talk calmly but insistently to him, stroking his brow as if he was a sick child.

François was half-led, half-carried upstairs. As he approached the bed, the effort of remaining awake and in control of himself seemed to become too much for him. He stumbled forward and collapsed on to the bed. Only when he was told that Besse was going to be all right, and that the ex-student felt confidence in treating him, did Mesrine himself go to bed.

The two men slept throughout the next day. Besse had been given a local anaesthetic when the bullet was removed from his arm, but Mesrine's sleep was natural. The former medical student remained in the house to treat François. His main occupation now was as a bank robber, but he was used to being asked to give first-aid to criminals on the run who could not go to an ordinary hospital or to a doctor. When he had been asked to come to the house he had not known the identity of the men he was expected to treat. But the man who owned the house kept the radio on all the time, desperately turning from one channel to another in an attempt to get the latest news. Mesrine's name was mentioned again and again. It was obvious to the medical student that the men he had been asked to help must be Mesrine and his accomplice, who had not yet been identified, although speculation suggested it might be Besse.

The owner of the house made no attempt to deny it. He assumed the student would guess, but believed that he was trustworthy and could be relied on. It was a risk he had to take if the two men were wounded.

So far it had not been a good summer in Northern France, but Jacques Mesrine thought that Tuesday, 30 May, was one of the most beautiful days he had ever seen. Having slept almost continually on Monday, he woke up a little before seven the next morning. It was with some surprise, after the nightmare of the escape from Deauville, that he felt on top of the world, in peak condition. He lay back on his pillow, savouring the sensation, and reviewing his plans for the immediate future. He gazed out of the window and could see a stretch of the Seine and a row of poplars behind it. He was alive and well. He got up quietly and went downstairs, assuming that everyone else would still be in bed. He was delighted to find that François was already up. He was sitting in the kitchen, his arm in a sling, eating heartily and telling his host a long and complicated story. Mesrine joined in the laughter at the end, more from relief at seeing François apparently well than at the joke.

The man who was hiding Mesrine and Besse was eager that they should stay with him for some time. He enjoyed their company and he felt that they both needed a rest. He was sure that they were safe with him: his house was not isolated, but neither was it overlooked by any other property; no one ever came to visit him unexpectedly, and he was not known by his neighbours to be a criminal. So there was very little chance that anyone

would find the fugitives by accident, and no reason for anyone to suspect that they were there. But Mesrine was insistent that he should return to Paris. There were things he wanted to do there and he did not want to be away from his flat for too long while he was on the run. It was important that his neighbours should have the impression that he was around quite a lot, even though they knew that he frequently travelled. So Mesrine and Besse returned to Paris, to their rented flats.

Mesrine enjoyed working with François Besse. Besse was younger than Mesrine: he was to be thirty-four in a few weeks. (Mesrine was now forty-one.) But he had considerable experience of professional crime; he had begun as an adolescent delinquent and had rapidly graduated. Mesrine had heard about Besse long before they met. Like Jacques, François was a veteran escaper. Twice he had escaped from the prison of Gradignan and once from Fresnes, climbing down a rope made out of curtains and bedcovers knotted together, to the delight of Mesrine.

He was thoroughly professional in every crime he undertook. He was cool-headed, resourceful and one of the best street-fighters in Paris. Slightly built, and very light on his feet, Besse could move with incredible speed, and was strong enough to overcome men much bigger than himself. He was not only physically quick; he also had an energetic, mercurial mind, darting rapidly from one subject to another. He loved puns, and his speech was invariably peppered with jokes, some clever, some childishly silly. He would disconcert people who did not know him by laughing aloud as they talked for no apparent reason. But it was usually because he had spotted some pun or double entendre in what they had said, and would assume that it had been intentional. Mesrine found his endless energy and the speed of his mind and reactions refreshing.

And they enjoyed the same pleasures. They were both womanizers and both thrived in the atmosphere of a party. They both liked high living, and both drank a great deal. Unlike Mesrine, Besse smoked constantly. They both wanted to live well, were vain, and were delighted when their talents were recognized. But Besse did not have Jacques's obsession with publicity. He was content to be well thought of in the underworld, whereas Mesrine felt that everyone, everywhere, should hear about and be impressed by his exploits. At this stage their different ambitions did not conflict. Both were trying to stay free and get rich and they enjoyed each other's company. It is said

by people who saw Mesrine and Besse together during this period that Besse almost idolized Mesrine. He had never, in all the years he had spent in the underworld and in French prisons, met anyone who felt so little fear of the police or of any physical injury.

The Deauville robbery had been a theatrical success but a financial failure. Mesrine now needed money badly. He made contact with several old friends, including Michel Schayewski, a member of the notorious Nenesse gang. This was a highly efficient group of criminals who worked south of Paris and specialized in hold-ups, extortion and protection rackets. Schayewski was an expert in armed robbery. He had known Mesrine in prison. The police believed that he and Mesrine had known each other and worked together years ago, prior to Mesrine's going to Canada. Mesrine's need for money led him to carry out two or three raids during June and July with members of the Nenesse gang and with other friends from the past. Surprisingly, during these raids, Mesrine made no attempt to identify himself, and the crimes were not distinguished by the flamboyance that usually marked his activities. They were simple, well-planned, carefully carried-out robberies. Mesrine never found an accomplice who shared his craving for publicity. The men who worked with him tended to be upset when he introduced himself to his victims, or took unnecessary risks just to boost his legend.

Towards the end of June Mesrine began planning, with Besse, a crime that would put him back where be believed he belonged – on the front page of every newspaper in France. He wanted to project the idea that he should be considered implacable, a man who never forgot an injury, and who would have his revenge, even if it was years later, for any wrong done to him. He remembered a senior bank employee, Jean-Claude Martigny, who had given evidence against him at his trial. At the time Martigny had been working for the Société Générale in the boulevard Gouvion-Saint-Cyr in the 17th *arrondissement*, which Mesrine held up on 4 September 1973. Mesrine telephoned the bank, pretending to be a friend of his. He was told that Martigny no longer worked there, but had gone to work for the branch of the Société Générale in Le Raincy, a suburb east of Paris.

Mesrine then telephoned the Le Raincy branch, at a time when he knew that it was unlikely that a senior employee would be there, and asked to speak to him, pretending once again to be a

friend. When he was told that M. Martigny was not there he asked whether, as a great favour, the clerk would give him Jean-Claude's home telephone number. He explained that he wanted to speak to him or his wife very urgently: an old friend was in Paris for a few hours and was very keen to see the Martigny family. The bank clerk gave him the number, apparently glad to be able to help the caller who sounded so charming. Mesrine had what he wanted. He looked up the name Martigny in the telephone directory and could confirm the correct address. Martigny lived in Noisy-le-Sec, an eastern suburb, about five miles from Paris. Armed with this information Mesrine began to plan his crime in detail. Besse liked the scheme. It was true that it contained elements of Mesrine's usual, headline-grabbing flamboyance, but it also seemed sound and likely to work. Unlike many of Jacques's wilder schemes, it entailed no unnecessary risks.

Very early in the morning of 30 June Mesrine and Besse set out on Mesrine's motor-bike for Noisy-le-Sec. At seven o'clock they hammered loudly on the front door of 19, rue Verlaine. Through the peep-hole in the door Janine Martigny, the bank employee's wife, saw two elegantly dressed men. One was much taller than the other, and was wearing thick corduroy trousers and a blue jacket. The other was wearing a petrol-blue suit. Both men were wearing ties. 'Police! Open up!' the taller man ordered loudly. Jean-Claude Martigny had by now joined his wife in the hall. They had no idea why the police might want to see them, but they had no reason to be worried. M. Martigny unbolted the door and opened it.

The two visitors walked into the hall and the smaller man closed the door behind him. 'Perhaps you recognize me. I'm Jacques Mesrine and I need some money.' Mesrine smiled genially and bowed very slightly towards Mme Martigny and then towards her husband, withdrawing a gun from inside his jacket as he did so. 'But I haven't got any money here,' Martigny said. He was clearly frightened. Jacques remained courteous and friendly. 'Well then, you're going to help me find some. Give me the keys of the safe in the bank. Of course, you haven't got them. It's the manager who has them. We'll go and find them together. My friend will stay here and look after your wife. Like that we'll make sure that you keep quiet.'

As he spoke Mesrine took a metal can with a spray top from his pocket. It contained chloroform and Besse was to use it if

necessary to control the woman and child. He handed it to François and put his revolver back in his pocket. He was completely calm and in total control of the situation. Florence, the Martignys' eleven-year-old daughter, came running down the hall, attracted by the sound of voices. Mesrine raised a hand towards her parents, as if to tell them to stay calm. 'Don't worry, nothing's going to happen to any of you. I have never fired at innocent people. And we musn't upset the child.'

He asked Mme Martigny to make some coffee for them before he and M. Martigny set off, and they went through into the kitchen with her. Mesrine chatted to Florence, stroked her hair and asked her what her favourite subjects at school were. He told Mme Martigny that the coffee she gave him was the most delicious coffee he had ever tasted. He told them about the robbery of the Deauville casino. During all this François said as little as possible. He made no attempt to project his own personality in the way Jacques was doing. Mesrine was flagrantly exercising his charm, making the little girl laugh, flirting subtly with Mme Martigny, and boasting to her husband about the amount of money he made from crime. He emphasized his personal code of honour, that he never injured the innocent, and robbed only banks and wealthy institutions.

Janine Martigny said later that she had rarely met anyone as polite and amiable as Mesrine. For almost two hours Mesrine and Besse sat in the kitchen with the family, whilst Mesrine regaled them with stories about himself. Mme Martigny, feeling more relaxed, plucked up courage to ask Mesrine whether he had always had tricoloured hair. He threw his head back and roared with laughter. 'No, madame, but in my profession it helps to wear a wig,' he explained, and then showed her that he was in fact wearing two wigs, one red and one light brown.

It was now almost nine o'clock. 'Now we'll go to the bank,' Mesrine announced to M. Martigny. 'We'll take your Peugeot 504.' 'Oh no, please don't take the car,' M. Martigny begged. 'It's new, and we need it to go on holiday in.' Mesrine reassured him, 'Don't worry, I'll leave it with you, and no harm will come to it.' Mesrine and Jean-Claude Martigny drove off to the Société Générale in Le Raincy, leaving Besse to guard Mme Martigny and the child. They were in the heart of Paris's commuter belt, and the traffic was badly congested at that time of the morning. The bank was only a couple of miles away but the journey took about twenty minutes.

They parked the car in the avenue de la Résistance, and went into the bank. M. Martigny led the way. Most of the employees of the bank were already at their counters when the two men walked in. Some looked up as M. Martigny walked past them and assumed that he was with an important client. Mesrine followed the banker into his office and sat down in a chair opposite his desk while M. Martigny called Marcel Ricard, the manager, on the internal telephone, and asked him to come to his office.

Within a few minutes M. Ricard arrived and Mesrine and Jean-Claude Martigny explained the situation to him. It was impossible for the manager to do anything but agree to take Mesrine down to the strong-room. But first, with Mesrine's permission, he telephoned Mme Martigny. Besse allowed her to pick up the telephone when it rang. 'Don't worry,' the manager told her, 'we are going to give him the money without making any fuss. Just keep calm. No harm will come to you or your husband.'

M. Ricard then led Mesrine and M. Martigny down to the strong-room. Two cashiers were summoned to acrry the cash for 'Monsieur'. The first was asked to fetch 350,000 francs, the second 100,000 francs. The money was slipped into a brief-case belonging to M. Martigny, and the three men returned upstairs. At the foot of the stairs Jacques Mesrine stood aside to allow the other two men to lead the way, with one hand inside his jacket. As they reached the top of the stairs they looked round expectantly at Mesrine, wondering what he wanted them to do next. 'Right,' he said, looking at them, 'let's go out to the car.'

Helplessly, the two hostages walked with him to where the light blue 504 was parked. Mesrine told M. Martigny to get into the driver's seat, and M. Ricard to sit beside him. He himself got into the back seat, and ordered Martigny to take him to the Gare du Nord. As they were leaving Le Raincy, Mesrine asked him to stop the car near a petrol station, so that he could make a telephone call. As he returned to the car he explained to the other two men that he had just spoken to his accomplice and had told him that everything had gone according to plan. 'Your wife's free now,' he told Jean-Claude Martigny. Then they drove into Paris. As they approached the place de Roubaix in front of the station, Mesrine told M. Martigny that he should drop him there. The car engine kept running as Mesrine stepped

out, thanking the manager and his assistant for their help. He then turned and walked into the Gare du Nord.

The staff at the bank realized what was happening as soon as they were asked to empty the safes. Until that moment there had been nothing to indicate that anything was wrong. After Mesrine and the two men had left the bank the other employees alerted the police and gave them a description of the 504. The police arrived at the bank within minutes. They took statements from the staff and roadblocks were set up on the main routes into Paris.

But the police were too late. By the time they stopped M. Martigny's car, the two bankers were on their way back to Le Raincy. Although Mesrine had told them that Janine and Florence Martigny had been freed, neither of the two men in the car was going to risk alerting the police until they were sure that he had been telling the truth. It was about 10.30 when a police car drew up outside the Martigny house in the rue Verlaine. They discovered that the second gangster had left as soon as Mesrine had telephoned him, driving away on the motor-bike on which he and Jacques had arrived in the quiet suburb that norning. Mme Martigny was shaken, but Besse had had no need to use the chloroform.

The police were furious. There seemed no doubt that the bank robber was Mesrine. He had succeeded once again, and again he had simply disappeared. No one who had been in the vicinity of the Gare du Nord that morning remembered seeing anyone answering to Mesrine's description. In any case, it was difficult for the police to give an exact description of him, since they knew that he had wigs of two different colours.

Mesrine and Besse met for lunch. They were delighted with themselves. All that remained was for Mesrine to read accounts of the affair in the next day's newspapers.

It was now the beginning of July 1978. The months of June and July were a time of great activity for Jacques. Not only was he re-establishing contact with several important criminal acquaintances, but he was rediscovering the delights of life in Paris, as a free man after four and a half long years in jail. He adored walking up and down the great boulevards, past the glittering shops, enjoying the opulence of Paris. He bought himself many clothes, although, much to his regret, he had to dress quite humbly most of the time. He indulged in possessions and derived great pleasure from buying himself an exquisitely

made wallet, umbrellas, beautiful watches and other luxury consumer goods, which he always paid for in cash.

A friend who was walking through a Paris department store with Mesrine in the early summer of 1978 witnessed an extraordinary incident. In the costume-jewellery department a young boy of about fifteen was ordered by a salesman to turn out his pockets. The boy obeyed and drew out several strings of beads and bracelets. 'I only wanted them for my mum, monsieur, she's not well.' The store employee looked jubilant. 'Yes, I've heard that one before. Well, the police will know how to deal with you,' he said. Tears were welling up in the boy's eyes. He hung his head as the man described the punishment he would get.

Jacques had been watching the scene from a few feet away and now stepped forward addressing the salesman. 'Well done, my man.' He looked sternly at the youth. 'There's far too much of this going on. We know the answer. Discipline for these young thugs. There's no point in being soft with kids. I am Inspector Burgou. I have special responsibility for juvenile affairs.' He flashed a card-holder containing a fake identity card and a driving licence, putting it away so quickly that it was impossible for the salesman or the boy to see it at all clearly. Grabbing the boy by the scruff of his jacket, he thanked the salesman for his help, saying that it was only through the vigilance of the public that crime could be kept under control in Paris. Mesrine's friend had watched the performance spellbound. He followed as Mesrine led the boy out of the store.

On the pavement Jacques released him and asked his name and address. 'What sort of trouble have you been in before?' 'None, monsieur.' Jacques looked at him sternly. 'Well, from now on the police are going to be keeping an eye open for you, and any whisper of bother from you and you're going to be in court, where you belong.' He lightly slapped the boy on the head. 'Now get out of my sight.' Mesrine explained to his friend, as the youth shot off as fast as he could, that he knew what happened to children who got into trouble with the police: they were treated like hardened criminals, and inevitably that was what they became. Mesrine told his friend that half the men rotting in French jails had begun their lives of crime like that boy, pinching a few things from a shop. He hoped that the boy was now sufficiently scared to behave himself.

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Although he had travelled a great deal Mesrine only felt truly at home in Paris. He described the city in sensuous terms, he adored the smells of smoke, of *brioches* and bread baking, of chestnut trees. He delighted in the buildings, in their subtle shades of honey-gold, pale grey and ecru. He loved to look into the courtyards of the great houses through the filigree wrought iron. Most of all he liked the intelligence and *savoir faire* of Parisians of all classes.

He revisited the great restaurants. His criminal acquaintances felt less at home in them than Mesrine did, or they disapproved of the *haute-bourgeoisie* attitudes that they represented. It was therefore more frequently with his law-abiding friends that Mesrine went out to dine. Some were the men he knew through the O.A.S. network; there remained a great loyalty among them towards those they had fought beside. Even those who had never raised a weapon in the O.A.S. cause, and had simply co-operated by helping to provide false documents or cash or information, were still willing to assist a former member.

There were also friends whom Mesrine trusted who had never had anything to do with the O.A.S. One of these was the man who was with Mesrine when he rescued the boy shoplifter. He was also with Mesrine when he went to Maxim's to dine and was horrified that the waiter apparently recognized Mesrine. The waiter smiled broadly, remarked that he had not seen him for a long time, and led the two men to one of the better tables. The friend, who was now afraid, asked in a whisper whether they hadn't better go. He thought that the waiter might telephone the police. Mesrine reassured him that the waiter had no idea who he was. Mesrine said that he probably knew that he had seen him before, and that it is a waiter's job to seem to know people he can't quite remember. And he added that although the staff at Maxim's were brilliant at remembering their customers, he made it difficult for them since each time he came in he looked different and gave a different name. Jacques pointed out that some of the tables in the restaurant were much better than others and if he had not appeared to know the waiter so well they might now be stuck in a corner. The friend reflected that he would feel much safer in a corner as Mesrine looked around him at the other customers and made a point of catching the eye of the smartest-looking people there.

One of Mesrine's pleasures in Paris was the nightclubs. He used to go to both the most expensive and glamorous and also the

most sordid. He loved the atmosphere in both types of establishment, be it Castel or Le Privé, or some tiny dive in the Pigalle. Their twilight world hardly ever failed to work its magic on Mesrine. The only clubs he despised were those that fell somewhere between the chic and the humble, the sort of place where English and American businessmen go with girl-friends on their expense accounts. He felt that the nightclub, where illusion is the reality, was, in a sense, his domain. In the darkness make-up lends a glamour even to the ugliest of women. The spotlight transforms the singer into a star.

It was the encapsulation of the world as he would like to see it.

In July a couple of weeks after the hold-up at Le Raincy, Mesrine met Sylvie Jeanjacquot in a bar. He needed a girl-friend. It was always safer for him, on the run, to be with a woman. Soon after his escape from La Santé, Mesrine had written to Raymond Daoust, his lawyer in Canada, expressing his anger with the French authorities for imprisoning Jocelyne. 'Now it's war. They will regret having provoked me in this way. There are no limits to what I might do when attacked through emotions. Whatever happens next, they will have to take the responsibility.'

He threatened to free her. The French police took the threat seriously. From the moment they heard of Mesrine's threat, they moved Jocelyne continually from cell to cell, and even from one prison to another. A private plane, a Piper Aztec, was seen flying over the exercise-yard of the prison where she was being held. It was flying low and seemed to be circling the prison. The warders and the prisoners all jumped to the same conclusion: 'Mesrine!'

On 7 June she was taken in an armoured van, escorted by police cars and outriders, to the Palais de Justice for trial. The security precautions were even tougher than during Mesrine's own trial in 1977. As she walked into the courtroom she was surrounded by police with machine-guns and fierce police dogs. But the French authorities wanted to get rid of her as quickly as possible. They were only too ready to believe that Mesrine would keep his word and manage to free her, which would make them look incompetent again. They found her guilty of using false identity papers and sentenced her to eight months in prison. The time she had already served, recently and in 1973, and the maximum remission time for good behaviour, added up to eight months. Within a few days Jocelyne was put on a plane back to Montreal.

Back home, she received two long affectionate letters from Mesrine. However, she said later that she had known that things between them were not the same. Jacques's situation was impossible. He knew that a permanent watch would be kept on the Deraiche house in Canada in case he should turn up there. He also knew that Jocelyne was lucky not to be still in jail in France and that if she returned to France she would find herself in serious trouble. Some time later Jocelyne heard on the radio that Mesrine was now accompanied by a new mistress, Sylvie Jeanjacquot. For the quiet girl from a Canadian suburb the tribulations of an affair with Mesrine were over. For twenty-seven-year-old Sylvie Jeanjacquot they were just beginning.

It was summer. Jacques was too much of a Parisian to want to stay in the city in August. He intended to travel around Europe for a few weeks. Perhaps he would go to Algeria, he thought. But first there was François's birthday to celebrate. On 25 July, Besse and Mesrine held a party in one of the flats they had rented in Paris. It was at 7, impasse St François, near Mesrine's flat in the impasse Charles-Albert. The two escaped convicts were renting several other flats at this time, one of them was in the 18th *arrondissement*, the area in which Mesrine most liked to live.

The impasse St François was a small, narrow street, but it was in easy reach of the boulevard Périphérique, the wide ring-road which encircles Paris and leads on to the various motorways running out of the city. This made a getaway easy, if it was necessary. The right side of the impasse was occupied by a row of old houses, low and picturesque. On the left side there was a large new building, surrounded by a well-kept lawn. The flat Besse and Mesrine were using was at the far end of the little cul-de-sac, in the last of the old houses. It was a small but well-equipped studio flat.

Quite a crowd gathered in the flat on 25 July. In addition to Mesrine and Besse there were Besse's new girl-friend, Michele Thereaux, and two friends of hers, Annie Verlaguet, a 24-year-old waitress and Ahmed Ghouil, an Algerian greengrocer. Jean-Luc Coupé, the young man Mesrine had met in a bar at the Porte Saint-Ouen, also came. It is said by people who were there that Sabrina Mesrine, the gangster's daughter, was there too. It was an excellent party, celebrating both Mesrine's and Besse's freedom as well as the birthday. Both of them had been serving long sentences and both had found prison intolerable. Even if they were recaptured the next day they would have had nearly

two months of freedom and life that otherwise they would not have known. Champagne corks popped and everyone was cheerful. Michele, a thirty-six-year-old ex-actress was to claim later that she had been entirely unaware of Besse's true identity. She said that he had introduced himself to her as Alain Lacave, a travelling representative for a grocery company in Lyons. If he seemed to her to be a little secretive and evasive, she explained it to herself by the fact that he said he was married and the father of three children. She was introduced to Mesrine as 'Bruno', a close friend of 'Alain'.

An interview with Mesrine was published in *Paris Match* on 4 August. It caused a sensation. It was not the content of the interview, which was much like what Mesrine had been saying for the last few years, especially in his letters to the press, that so outraged the police and a section of the public. It was rather that the most wanted man in France should dare to arrange a meeting with a representative of the press. He had given the interview in July to a freelance Parisian journalist, Isabelle de Wangen.

On 27 July, about a week earlier, Mesrine and friends set off on the holiday he had been planning. They formed quite a procession that wound its way across France into Italy. It was headed by Ahmed Ghouil, driving a Mercedes, with Annie. Behind them came Basse on a Honda 750 motor-bike, and, bringing up the rear, Mesrine in a Peugeot with Sylvie Jeanjacquot, who had agreed to join him in his flight from the police. Michele would travel in either of the cars, or would ride pillion behind Besse. Ghouil later explained that it was only half-way through the holiday that he had discovered the true identity of Besse and Mesrine and that they had forced him to drive across Europe with them.

The six tourists stopped for a time in Genoa, and then in Palermo. Wherever they went they lived well, and spent hours lying in the sun. They spent most of the time sightseeing and bathing. Mesrine also visited several people with whom he was eager to make contact.

This holiday was rather different from the one in 1972, the tour of New York and Venezuela with Jean-Paul Mercier and Jocelyne. Firstly Mesrine was now being sought much more actively by the police and in every country he visited he had to be careful not to behave flamboyantly or attract attention. Secondly, his companions were not glamorous. Ahmed, Michele and Annie would have been out of place in the expensive nightclubs,

casinos and restaurants so favoured by Mesrine. And Sylvie lacked the elegance of Jocelyne. The cortège finally reached Algeria. The group all stayed for a few days in Sidi-Ferruch and then they split up, Besse, Mesrine and Sylvie flew to London. It was by now the end of August. They stayed for a few days in a hotel near Marble Arch, then Besse returned to France and went to stay with Michele and Annie.

Mesrine was planning a new outrage. He intended to kidnap the judge who had sentenced him to twenty years in prison, and hold him to ransom, demanding that the top-security wings in French prisons should be closed. Besse refused to have anything to do with it. He was sure that it would lead to his arrest, and anyway the proposal would be non-profit-making. He had a great admiration for Mesrine, but he was unwilling to risk being captured during a publicity stunt. He is also said to have told Mesrine that he did not have confidence in the people Mesrine was planning to use in his new scheme. Mesrine was undeterred and continued to lay plans for what he hoped would be seen as his most daring and brilliant coup yet.

In the meantime he discovered, to his surprise, that he liked London. He decided to set up a hideout in England. He knew that the English were notoriously uncurious, and would therefore, he hoped, not be too interested in a newcomer to the community. He also knew that although Scotland Yard would have been sent details about him through Interpol, they had no reason to consider his recapture a priority. As far as they knew, he had never been to England. He looked for a flat, and quickly found one in Palliser Road, Baron's Court. An advantage of the flat from Mesrine's point of view was that it was on the west side of London and could be reached quickly from Heathrow. This was important sinceMesrine wanted to be able to slip easily backwards and forwards between London and Paris. The flat was on the first floor of a terraced house. It was not the most luxurious of Mesrine's hideouts while he was on the run, but it was warm and quite comfortable. Mesrine was so involved with planning the details of his next project that for once he was not much concerned with his surroundings.

In Paris the hunt for Mesrine continued. Frequently the police stated that they had new information, that they were getting nearer to Mesrine all the time. Public demand for Mesrine stories in the press was continually growing. Whenever there was no

other news of any substance, journalists could always rehash the *affaire Mesrine*. Every week or so there would be an article asking what the police were doing to catch him. They would be blamed for their laziness and incompetence. Under the cover of concern about the efficiency of the nation's police forces, the Mesrine anecdotes could be retold. The police and the judicial authorities were roused further by this criticism that was levelled at them. They were determined to be seen to be active.

In the middle of August Daniel Filipacchi, the publisher of *Paris Match*, was charged with condoning murder and theft, as a result of his magazine's publishing Isabelle de Wangen's interview. The police were also suspicious about the circumstances of the interview. Was it possible that Mlle de Wangen knew where Mesrine was hiding? She was taken in for questioning. This in turn angered the French press. She was a young but distinguished crime reporter and, her colleagues claimed, had only been doing her job. She was freed, but the police remained suspicious. Soon afterwards she married Jean-Louis Pelletier, the brilliant advocate who had pleaded for Mesrine at his 1977 trial. Their marriage was one of the best-guarded weddings of the decade: although the police had no knowledge that either Mlle de Wangen or M. Pelletier were in touch with Mesrine, they thought that he might enjoy the idea of turning up at the wedding, particularly with every policeman in France looking for him. Dozens of policemen, uniformed and in plain clothes, surrounded the Vieux Galion, a boat-restaurant on the Seine where the reception was held. All along the quay they were waiting, dressed as old men or young housewives, everyone of them armed. But, to the disappointment of the police and the relief of the newly married Pelletiers and their families, Mesrine did not come. He was travelling between London and Paris. It was nearly time for him to put his plan into action.

None of Mesrine's more professional accomplices would have anything to do with the scheme. The two who agreed to help were Jean-Luc Coupé and Christian Kopf, known as 'Kiki', a twenty-six-year-old friend without a criminal record. Christian's role was simple: he was only to drive Mesrine and Coupé to the scene of the crime.

Friday, 10 November, was the date Jacques fixed. Latterly he had tried as often as possible to work on Fridays. It was the day of the week on which the police were always the most under-

staffed and over the week-end it was more difficult for them to co-ordinate an inquiry. The robberies at Deauville and at Le Raincy had both been carried out on a Friday.

At about 7 o'clock on 10 November Mesrine and Coupé rang the doorbell of a flat on the second floor at 5, rue Alphonse XIII in the 16th *arrondissement*. It was the home of Charles Petit, the judge who had presided at Mesrine's trial. Madame Petit came to the door and was horrified to see a man standing there wearing a hood accompanied by a smaller man with a heavy beard. Both of them were carrying guns. 'Is M. Petit at home?' 'No, he is at the Assizes Court.' 'Fine. Well, we'll wait for him.' She tried to close the door in their faces, but they pushed their way into the flat.

The judge's daughter and her husband were also in the flat. Coupé kept them covered while Mesrine quickly searched through the flat, saying that he wanted to make sure that the judge was really not there. The search was surprisingly thorough. It seems likely that Mesrine was looking for specific documents. This might explain why he had chosen to arrive at the flat at a time when the judge would be out at court. It would not have been difficult for him to establish the judge's movements. But Jean-Luc's inexperience showed: he was incapable of controlling the hostages. While Mesrine was ransacking the flat the judge's daughter heard a noise at the front door. She knew that her brother was coming home that evening and managed to slip to the door, unseen by Coupé. She quickly whispered to him to fetch the police immediately. Jean-Luc Coupé realized that something was going on and fetched her back into the drawing-room from the hall. He did not, however, realize that she had managed to send for help. Mesrine finished his search and began explaining to his hostages that he wanted Judge Petit to use his influence with the Ministry of Justice to persuade them to close the top-security wings in the prisons. He said that unless they were closed he would begin to assassinate magistrates.

The judge's son raced down the stairs two at a time. He ran into the *concierge*'s lodge and telephoned the police. Mesrine, upstairs, was relaxed. He knew that the judge would not be home for some time and he settled down for a long wait. He continued to explain his anger about conditions in French prisons. He walked around the room as he spoke. He had been rough with Mme Petit when he pushed past her into the flat and now was trying to establish a calmer atmosphere. He kept talking, aware

that his voice had a calming effect. As he spoke he crossed to the window.

In horror, he saw several police cars drawing up outside and uniformed policemen swarming out of them. 'Quickly – get out!' he gasped to Coupé, as he ran to the door of the flat. He pulled off his hood. Coupé ran on to the landing behind Mesrine, from where he could see armed policemen gathering at the bottom of the stairs, two flights down. They were milling around, uncertain which flat they had been called to.

Mesrine beckoned to Coupé to follow him. For a vital few seconds Coupé was paralysed by fear. The police were beginning to come upstairs. Jean-Luc could see that they were trapped. Mesrine ran down the stairs. On the first landing he came face to face with several policemen brandishing guns. 'Quick, Mesrine's up there!' he shouted to them. The name had an extraordinary effect. They thought they had perhaps come to a small robbery. There had been no suggestion that the most wanted man in France was up there!

They ran faster, shouting in their excitement. Their war-cries echoed through the luxury apartment block. Before Mesrine reached the bottom of the stairs all the policemen had rushed past him. A few shots rang out upstairs as he dashed across the mosaic-floored hall.

A young policeman, standing guard outside the door, watched as a big, burly man came rushing out of the building. The policeman suddenly realized he had seen the face before – on a poster displayed in every police station in the country. 'Mesrine!' he shouted. The man stopped quickly and turned. He drew a revolver from one pocket and handcuffs, meant for the judge, from another.

Upstairs there was still confusion. In the gunfire no one had been hurt and Coupé had been arrested without trouble. But had Mesrine really been there and, if so, where was he now? The police sealed off the top floors of the building. They arrested a completely innocent neighbour by mistake. They thought that Mesrine might have managed to get out on to the roof of the building, or that he might be in another flat, holding the residents at gunpoint.

Christian Kopf, the chauffeur of the expedition, had driven away when he saw the police rush into the building. He knew that Mesrine would not expect him to stay around and get arrested, and it seemed quite clear that Mesrine and Coupé had

no hope of getting out. Mesrine had taken in at a glance the fact that Kopf was no longer there. He ran to the junction at the end of the rue Alphonse XIII, where an Alfa Romeo was waiting to turn into the rue Raymond. Mesrine opened the passenger-seat door and got in, pointing his gun at the driver. He ordered him to drive on, giving directions. Two or three minutes later Mesrine thanked the terrified man for his help, left the car and melted into the crowd in the place du Trocadero.

At 5, rue Alphonse XIII the police were still looking for the second criminal. They had discovered by now that two men had burst into the Petits' flat, but there was no proof that either of them was Mesrine. The missing man had not introduced himself as Mesrine. The police began to suspect that it was paranoia which had made the plain-clothes detective running down the stairs (or had he been a neighbour?) say that Mesrine was upstairs. There was a tendency at that time to assume that Mesrine was behind every crime in Paris. If it was at all possible that he was somewhere in the building, they couldn't afford to let him get away.

They decided to radio to headquarters for reinforcements. It might be a good idea to seal off the block so that if he was still in the building he would have little chance of escaping. Two men went downstairs to use the car radio. Just outside the building they found the young colleague who had recognized Mesrine. He was handcuffed to a drainpipe, sobbing quietly.

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Mesrine made his way into the Trocadero métro station and took a train to St Augustin, on the boulevard Haussman. He then found a taxi to take him most of the way back to the flat in the Impasse St François. A few streets away from the flat he paid off the taxi-driver and got out. He walked the last few hundred yards. Inside the flat he poured himself a drink and turned on the radio. His fears were quickly confirmed: a news bulletin announced that a man had been arrested during a failed attempt to kidnap a Paris judge.

Mesrine was very distressed that poor Jean-Luc had fallen into the hands of the police. Mesrine knew that he would be given a hard time, and felt guilty for having involved the young

man in an affair that had led to his arrest. He knew that the affection and interest that he had shown had meant a great deal to Jean-Luc, but he could also imagine how lonely and terrified he must be feeling now. He knew that Jean-Luc would receive quite a long prison sentence and probably wouldn't have the resourcefulness to try to escape. From a more selfish point of view Mesrine had lost a useful junior lieutenant. Coupé had his limitations, but he had always been very willing to help Mesrine and to perform the most dreary errands for him.

Mesrine had not expected his kidnap of Judge Petit to misfire as badly as it had done. The details of what he intended to do when the judge returned home and where he intended to hold him during the negotiations with the authorities have never become clear. It is probable that no one but Jacques himself knew exactly what his plans were. He had, in any case, not foreseen losing Jean-Luc in this way. He now had to think quickly about what to do next. He knew enough of human nature and of the interrogation methods of the French police to realize that it was very likely that Jean-Luc would talk.

He decided that it was necessary for him to leave the flat in Impasse St François. He could not take any avoidable risks. He had abandoned the flat in the Impasses Charles-Albert since the publication of Isabelle de Wangen's interview. He had allowed her to take some photographs of him there and he realized that the flat might be identified from them. It was a tiny risk and leaving the flat was inconvenient. But no risk was acceptable. For the same reason he would now have to leave the Impasse St François. He hurriedly gathered all documents and pieces of evidence that would reveal the location of another hideout or compromise himself or an accomplice. In any case Mesrine was too experienced to have in his possession any unnecessary evidence that might incriminate someone else or lead the police to him. Into an overnight bag he put a couple of shirts, a couple of passports and some underwear. He threw three revolvers on top of the clothes before zipping up the bag. Sadly he pulled the door of the studio shut behind him, crossed the little courtyard that led into the main house, walked through the hall and out of the front door into the Impasse St François. It was by now about ten o'clock in the evening.

The streets of Paris were alive with young people flocking to theatres, cinemas and discothèques. The cafés were busy, and the nightclubs were beginning to fill. It was Friday, 10 Novem-

ber, the day before Armistice Day and a public holiday. Mesrine made his way across the city to a friends flat. From a telephone in a café two blocks away from the flat he telephoned his friend. Mesrine was in luck. The friend was at home and was alone. A few minutes later Mesrine arrived at the flat. The woman who owned the flat was a trustworthy friend whom he had known for some years.

An hour or so after he had arrived at the flat Mesrine went out to telephone Christian Kopf and Sylvie Jeanjacquot. First he talked to Sylvie and warned her not to go back to the Impasse St François. He arranged to meet her the next day. He then rang Christian. To Mesrine's great relief Kopf had reached home safely. Mesrine told him to lie low for a few weeks. He promised to be in touch with him again as soon as possible and hung up.

Mesrine looked around him, surreptitiously. He was aware that the police might be on to Kopf, but that they might not have shown themselves yet. They could have seen his car outside the Petits' flat and identified it. They could be tracing incoming calls to Christian's flat. It was for this reason that Mesrine had not risked making any telephone calls from his friend's flat: he didn't want to incriminate her. He picked up the receiver again, pretending to be making another call, and as he did so he looked around him again. He was certain that he was not being followed. He left the callbox and returned to his friend's flat.

The next day, despite the Armistice celebrations, the intensity of the police investigation was stepped up. Dozens of policemen had their leave cancelled. The police were by now convinced that it had been Mesrine who had attempted to kidnap Judge Petit. They suspected it as soon as they heard that one of the kidnappers had talked about top-security wings in French prisons. Their suspicions were confirmed during Saturday when Jean-Luc Coupé cracked. He had kept quiet for a surprisingly long time. At first he refused to give his name and then he gave a series of false ones. Throughout the previous night fingerprint experts had been searching through their files trying to discover whether he already had a police record. Twice during the night they thought they had identified him. They found two sets of prints with several points of similarity with Jean-Luc's. But each time, they found that they were wrong. The police realized that he did not have a record. They showed him photographs of Mesrine, but he insisted that he had never seen him before. He repeated that he had met his accomplice earlier on the evening

of the kidnap attempt in a bar. He did not know his name, he said. The police were unconvinced. But they were baffled by the young man who sat in front of them. Mesrine's hallmarks were panache, professionalism and intelligence. The prisoner did not appear to possess any of these qualities.

It was inevitable that the police would get him to talk in the end. There was no question of releasing him and, they pointed out to him as the interrogation dragged on, they had all the time in the world. Eventually he gave in. He had done his best to protect Mesrine and said nothing to put him at greater risk, but he could keep it up no longer. He talked and went on talking for hours. He told the police everything he knew. He told them how he had met Mesrine in a bar and how Mesrine had befriended him. He gave them the addresses of Mesrine's flats in the Impasse St François and the Impasse Charles-Albert. Policemen were dispatched immediately to keep watch on both addresses. Meanwhile Jean-Luc kept on talking.

The police discovered from talking to the neighbours that Mesrine had not been seen at the flat in the Impasse Charles-Albert for some time. They entered the flat and searched it for any clues to Mesrine's whereabouts. There were none. However, they did realize that this was where Isabelle de Wangen's photographs of Mesrine had been taken for the *Paris Match* article. She had claimed that she had been driven blindfold to a house in the country, where Mesrine had been hiding. Now they had proof that she had met him in Paris. They continued to keep watch on the flat in the Impasse Charles-Albert.

It was a demanding day for the Paris police-force. The President of the Republic attended a high Mass at Notre Dame in the morning in commemoration of the Armistice. It was sixty years since, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, peace had returned to war-weary Europe. Armistice Day was one of the traditional occasions on which the President would always appear in public. The security arrangements surrounding the President had to be given top priority by the police. On almost every occasion of this sort there would be some minor incident, an assassination threat or a small demonstration. Although the risk of a serious incident was very small, every precaution had to be taken.

At the same time the police were desperate to capture Mesrine. They were worried that crowds of people in the streets could interfere with any attempted arrest, particularly if it came to a

shoot-out. At the moment they were keeping a discreet watch on the Impasse St François. As soon as they had confirmation that Mesrine was there they would want armed men on the scene.

The security nightmare of Armistice Day did not end when Giscard D'Estaing and the other dignitaries filed solemnly out of the Cathedral into the cold sunshine of the November morning. They paused in the place du Parvis Notre Dame in front of the greatest of French churches while dozens of photographers recorded the gathering of politicians and war-veterans who had attended the Mass. Giscard D'Estaing's next engagement was reviewing a march-past of troops in the Etoile, and laying a wreath against the Arc de Triomphe in memory of the unknown French soldier buried under the eternal flame in the central arcade. This was followed by a rousing speech, recalling the sacrifices of the dead of two wars and the years of disillusionment that France had known since 1918. Journalists scribbled furiously, and French hearts were proud.

At that moment the most wanted man in the country was queuing at the Gare du Nord to buy a ticket to England.

The next day, Sunday 12 November, Isabelle de Wangen was arrested for the second time. The police had continued to keep a permanent watch on the flat in the Impasse St François. Since Mesrine had not been there in the last two days they began to fear that he had abandoned the flat. They decided to search it for any new evidence, leaving heavily-armed guards outside in case he should arrive. The police were amazed by what they found in the flat.

There was a wardrobe full of silk shirts, English shoes and tailor-made suits in the bedroom. In the kitchen was a crate of champagne and in the bathroom a bottle of Trumper's West Indian Essence of Limes: in the sideboard were three bullet-proof vests, two gas-masks, a radio transmitter and receiver tuned to the frequency of the police-radio band, a box of rifles, five machine-guns, dozens of grenades and half a dozen revolvers. They had known that he always used guns and had fully expected to find fire-arms and ammunition in his flat, but the size of his arsenal horrified them. He had managed to amass this collection in only six months!

Methodically the police loaded the weapons into the back of a van, wrapping them carefully so as not to destroy any finger-prints. They closed every drawer and cupboard that they had opened and tried to make the flat look to a first glance as if no

one had been there. Most of the policemen, and the weapons they had confiscated, returned to Police Headquarters. A smaller detachment of armed policemen was left to keep watch on the flat in case Mesrine or any of his accomplices should return.

The next day Commissaire Serge Devos, head of the Brigade de Repression de Banditisme arrived at his desk early. He was aware that his reputation in the profession and outside depended on the capture of Mesrine. The mail was brought in to him by a silent young policeman. Only those letters which subordinates could not deal with or which expressly demanded his personal attention, reached his desk. The others were already being handled by teams of clerks and junior police-officers. On the top of the pile was one of the most extraordinary letters Devos had ever received. It was a personal letter from Jacques Mesrine. It explained his grievances against the top-security wings. It explained that he was 'a sincere man acting freely for a cause he considers important'. It described Jean-Luc as 'a socialist who acted sincerely'.

Mesrine's main grievance against the police seemed to be that they had not released to the press all the details of his escape from Petit's flat. He was furious that the press had not yet been told that he had succeeded in handcuffing a policeman to a drain-pipe. He sent a copy of the letter to the newspaper *Le Matin* and two days later every paper in Paris had picked up the story of Mesrine's open letter to the police. They were particularly delighted by the ending of the letter, 'Goodbye, Devos, and good hunting.'

The English press also picked up the story of the letter. They had reported Mesrine's attempt to kidnap Judge Petit, and *The Times* of 15 November ran a headline: 'M. Mesrine writes an open letter to the police.' Mesrine may have seen the article. There is a theory that he was in England on the day that it was published. The Paris police had discovered the address of the London flat. Mesrine had assumed that although Coupé would give them the addresses of his Paris hideouts, the one in London would be safe. This was a miscalculation on his part. Scotland Yard were contacted by the French police and asked to watch the flat and, if possible, to arrest Mesrine. It was inexplicably announced in the French press the next day that the police knew the address of Mesrine's London flat. Mesrine read the French newspapers every day, wherever he was, and so was worried. It was the most extraordinary leak of information, and it is still

not known how it happened. But the result was perfectly clear. Mesrine would now not return to Palliser Road.

Scotland Yard raided the flat, looking for clues. Mesrine had left behind in the flat a metal trunk full of press cuttings about himself. This was not the sort of behaviour the English police were used to in a criminal. Xenophobic sentiments were uttered with more than usual frequency in the police-stations of London as the story spread. The police also found false beards and moustaches in the flat. The testimony of the neighbours and the local shopkeepers that he had always dressed beautifully, and had seemed very charming, pleased the press but did nothing to endear Mesrine to Scotland Yard.

Whether or not Mesrine returned to France straight away, or whether he stayed in England for a while is not certain. But from the moment that the French police realized that he had been tipped off about the London flat they had to assume that he was back in Paris. The questioning of Jean-Luc Coupé went on. He thought that he had told them everything he knew by now, but the police went over his statements with him again and again. They believed that he had by now told them everything he could, but they wanted to stimulate him to remember more. Any little detail that could be dragged out of him, however unimportant it might appear to him, might give the crucial lead. They had released Isabelle de Wangen, as there was nothing with which they could charge her.

By the beginning of December Mesrine was back in France. He had often said that he loved Christmas in Paris, and this year he intended to enjoy it to the full. It was his first Christmas as a free man for five years. He spent hours buying presents for his friends and his family. Even those people whom it was too dangerous for him to see he would try to send presents to.

Mesrine realized that he needed a lot of money to remain free. Life on the run was extremely expensive, and although he had made quite a lot of money since his escape from prison, he had far from enough to give him the security he wanted. It was essential that he should be able to rent two or three flats in Paris at any one time. It would be an advantage to have another hideout outside Paris as well. He needed to be able to afford to travel and he usually had two fares to pay, his own and Sylvie's. He had been forced to abandon all the clothes he owned on several occasions, when he had had to leave a flat quickly. In other words, if he was to survive comfortably, he

was going to have to carry out one big job that would raise a substantial amount of money.

Mesrine was carefully making new contacts. During the summer he had visited underground political leaders in Italy and Algeria, with whom he had been trying to make contact ever since he had been in La Santé. In prison he had met several men who were involved with left-wing groups and he had become very interested in some possible liaison with these groups. His hatred of the conditions in French prisons had evoked a fanatical passion for human rights that he does not seem to have felt before 1973. This meant that he now began to identify ideologically with the extreme left. He also knew, from his experience with the O.A.S., that radical political groups tended to have safer security than the criminal underworld. In the criminal underworld almost every man can be bought; fanatics are less vulnerable.

Mesrine knew that his particular skills would be of interest to any extremist political group. His excellent knowledge of firearms of every sort, his proven skill in major robberies, his near-legendary fearlessness and quick-thinking were all talents that any quasi-terrorist organization would be able to use. And on top of all that his reputation and the enormous public interest in his exploits could perhaps be a great asset to an extremist group. For many in France, especially the young, he was a great hero. His style and daring had won him the sneaking admiration of millions more.

Whilst there seemed to be no tangible alliance developing between Mesrine and any particular group, he devoted a great deal of time to establishing contacts. During the first few months of 1979 he said repeatedly that he was dedicated to the left-wing cause.

Mesrine never seems to have considered that it was odd that he should have fought with the Neo-Fascist O.A.S., and received help and advice from what still remained of the organization, and yet now be declaring himself on the side of the most left-wing groups in Europe. He had an extraordinary capacity to believe that whatever cause he was fighting for must be right. He enjoyed rhetoric, whether of the O.A.S., or the Red Brigades. Mesrine believed in each in turn. But he probably could just as well have believed in any other cause that claimed great virtues and declared contempt and hatred for an enemy.

All his life Mesrine had had a great distaste for the conformity

and the mediocrity of the lives of so many of his countrymen. And despising them, he had always felt himself to be an outsider, even as a child. He felt happiest when his enemy was clearly defined – whether it was the unpatriotic government and the Algerians, or the repressive government and the police, it didn't really matter. The world had, he felt, never treated him well enough; it was only as a result of cutting himself off from society and setting his own standards that he had gained recognition. But he knew that he needed a reason for his declared battle against the authorities. He always said that he was fighting against the conditions in the top-security wings. Mesrine realized that he needed a broader-based cause than mere prison conditions, one which emphasized his political commitment. What Mesrine really needed, and what his campaign against the top-security wings gave him, was an intelligible and respectable formulation for his war against the world.

One of the ways in which Mesrine felt he could win a battle in this was by becoming still more famous, by receiving even more publicity. And in order to fight he needed cash urgently. In early January 1979 he tried to satisfy his desire for publicity and for money by sending a threatening letter to Jean-Claude Lattes, the publisher of his autobiography. He claimed that he was owed 230,000 francs which he had never been paid. The letter was published in the French press on January 5th. The profits from the book had been frozen by order of the government. Mesrine was unsuccessful in getting the money but his death-threat to Jean-Claude Lattes was widely publicized in France and abroad. It reinforced the image Mesrine had tried to establish when he sought out M. Martigny at Le Raincy and held his family hostage, of the implacable man who would always have his revenge.

Jacques's need for money was becoming desperate. He could survive for another few months, but he realized that the search for him was becoming so intense that each minor robbery he carried out might jeopardize his safety. A new plan was beginning to form in his mind. He was going to move away from bank robbery for a while. With a trusted accomplice he began to plan a major kidnapping. The victim, they decided, should be a wealthy industrialist. They drew up a short-list of people, and began to study each of them, discovering where they lived, what security precautions, if any, surrounded them, and how

rich they really were. They also tried to find out as much as they could about the temperaments of their potential victims. It was important that it should not be someone who would panic and become hysterical in a crisis.

After a few weeks Mesrine and his accomplice were sure that they had discovered the perfect victim. Then, with his characteristic precision he began the detailed planning. He took pleasure in working out in advance every eventuality. He would fix a date for a job, months ahead sometimes, and then work out not only the time of the sunset, but what phase the moon would be in. He would drive several times over a crucial route, taking into account such things as the fact that in a few months' time the view would be impaired by the leaves on the trees. He would time to within a second the shortest time in which a journey could be covered. And he would carefully plot routes that were the least likely to be subject to delay.

Detailed planning was not the only thing that was going to be necessary for this particular coup. The kidnapping would cost a great deal of money to set up. They would have to rent a house, in an isolated place, in which to keep the victim while they carried out the negotiations with his family. They would need to be able to afford to travel around the country during the negotiations, and there was no way of knowing how long the negotiations would take. They could press for a quick conclusion to the affair, but they had to be prepared to keep the prisoner for a few months if necessary. So with all this in mind Mesrine and his accomplice held up a supermarket at Massy on 20 January and took 400,000 francs. As they walked into the supermarket Mesrine flashed a Ministry of Justice identity card at the cashier and whilst holding hostage the manager and a woman and child, emptied the company safe. It was a straightforward crime and its successful conclusion enabled Mesrine to go ahead with the plans for the 'big one'.

He was still living in Paris. He had two or three rented flats that he alternated between and he was with Sylvie almost constantly. She was an ideal companion for Mesrine. She was willing to act as a sort of bodyguard for him, carrying guns around in her handbag and keeping watch to make sure that they were not being followed. Her pretty, dark looks were not distinctive and like Mesrine she was able to merge into any crowd. She was tall but not abnormally so and, wearing a blonde wig,

was almost completely unrecognizable as the girl whose photograph was now constantly being published alongside Mesrine's.

In March 1979 Mesrine received some bad news. François Besse had been arrested on the 11th in Brussels with Michele, Annie and Ahmed. After leaving Mesrine he had been in touch with his old underworld contacts and had even been to visit his mother at her home in Cognac. It had not been difficult for the police to pick up his trail. Mesrine was upset because he was fond of Besse and respected him, but he knew that his arrest would not present any risk to himself. Coupé had talked, but Besse would not. Of that Mesrine was certain. Loyalty to one's friends was something Mesrine knew to be important to François. Mesrine decided to help François to escape. He began trying to communicate with Besse using his extensive contacts in the prison service.

Firstly, however, there was the kidnap plan to carry out. At the beginning of June Mesrine's accomplice went down to the Loire valley to look for a house to rent. Through an agency he found a suitable one, a low stone house at Breuil, near Blois. Everything was now ready. Mesrine's accomplice made just one stipulation before they went ahead with the kidnap. While the affair was in progress Mesrine should desist from any publicity stunts. There were to be no letters to the press boasting that he was responsible and no suggestion at all to the family during the negotiations that Mesrine was the kidnapper. But he needed the money badly and agreed to the condition.

On 21 June, he stood with his accomplice in front of a large, old gabled house in the village of Maresche near Le Mans. Together they strolled up the drive towards the ivy-covered mansion. They were dressed casually but smartly and looked as if they could be business advisers or lawyers. They knocked on the door and asked to speak to M. Lelièvre. Henri Lelièvre was an 82-year-old ex-banker and industrialist, known to be one of the forty richest men in France.

When he arrived to speak to his two visitors Mesrine introduced himself and his accomplice as two local policemen. He showed the elderly man a police identity card, handing it to him so that he could examine it and check the photograph. Mesrine took the card back apologizing for disturbing M. Lelièvre; he said that there were some routine inquiries being made and the police would be most grateful for his assistance. They asked

whether it might be possible for him to accompany them to the police station. They would, of course, they said, send him home by car. M. Lelièvre said he would be glad to help them. He collected his coat and went out with them to the car, which was parked at the end of the drive. It was about twenty minutes later, when he realized that he was not being driven to any of the local police stations, and that the two men with him refused to tell him where they were taking him, that he was being kidnapped. They drove straight to the house near Blois, and bundled Lelièvre inside.

The negotiations proved long and difficult. Mesrine and his accomplice had to contact Michel, the son of the industrialist on several occasions. They made their prisoner write a number of letters to his family asking them to raise the ransom. The family had contacted the police who insisted that they should be informed immediately, every time the kidnappers made contact.

There was speculation M. Lelièvre's captor might be Mesrine. The manner of the snatch and the impersonation of policemen, suggested Mesrine to many Frenchmen. But there was no evidence that it was Mesrine, and the theory was dismissed as far-fetched.

Mesrine and his accomplice kept the elderly man in a room fifteen feet square. Much of the time he was kept chained to a bed, and he was released several times each day; they tried to be as courteous to him as was possible in the circumstances. The conditions were simple. The inside of the house was basically one large room, divided by a wooden partition. M. Lelièvre was kept on one side of the partition and the kidnappers cooked, slept and talked on the other side. Mesrine brought in a second trusted accomplice, and often there would be only one guard on duty, but the prisoner could not tell how many of them might be there. In any case he would not dare to tackle Mesrine or either of the two accomplices who were helping him.

In order to prove that the hostage was still alive Mesrine's accomplice took photographs of M. Lelièvre, talking to Mesrine who was disguised by a huge carnival mask grotesquely representing Georges Marchais, the French communist leader. In his interview with Isabelle de Wangen Mesrine had expressed his admiration for Marchais, and it was to *Paris Match*, that Mesrine subsequently sent the photograph.

M. Lelièvre later said that Mesrine had introduced himself and talked to him at some length. He thought that Mesrine

was an intelligent man, who would have made good in business. He claimed to have told the gangster that he '. . . would come to no good'.

The first attempt to collect the ransom money went wrong. The police followed Michel Lelièvre but were spotted by Mesrine's accomplice who managed to escape under heavy fire from the police, but without the ransom. Mesrine contacted the family again and this time made it clear that it was vital for M. Lelièvre's safety that the police did not know where or when the handover took place. Michel managed to give the police the slip and delivered the ransom of six million francs in used 50 franc notes.

Mesrine had arranged a route for Michel which could be surveyed from a hillside to make sure that the police were not following. Early on the morning of 28 July, M. Lelièvre was released in Paris, safe and well but very tired, near a taxi-rank in the 17th *arrondissement*. The kidnappers had not taken his wallet or his personal papers, and he managed to make his way to his flat in the rue de la Fédération. The police were furious that they had been duped. Michel Lelievre had arranged for a friend who looked rather like him to leave the Lelièvre house near Le Mans in his white Mercedes. The police naturally thought that the friend was Michel and followed the car. Several hours later they lost it near Senlis. Then they realized that Michel had not been driving. Despite their anger there was nothing that they could do; no one could really blame M. Lelièvre's son for his action, complying with the kidnappers' demands to protect his father.

As soon as M. Lelièvre spoke to the police it became obvious that Mesrine had been responsible for the kidnapping. During the seven weeks that the hunt for the old man had been going on clues had been building up which pointed to Mesrine's involvement. The voice on the tape-recorded messages to the Lelièvre family bore a marked resemblance to that of Mesrine. The kidnappers had communicated with the family through classified newspaper advertisements in a way that Mesrine was known to have done before. The first pick-up spot for the ransom money was at Dammartin-en-Goele, near Meaux where Mesrine had been at school. There was a noticeable similarity between some of the ransom notes and letters known to have been sent by Mesrine; several phrases were reminiscent of the threatening letter he sent to Jean-Claude Lattes. M. Lelièvre confirmed their

suspicions when he also told the police that Mesrine had actually identified himself.

Mesrine meanwhile was jubilant. For the first time since his escape, indeed almost for the first time in his life, he felt financially secure. Moreover, during the time that Henri Lelièvre was being held prisoner François Besse escaped.

On 26 July Besse appeared at the Palais de Justice in Brussels. As he stood in front of the judge he grabbed two guns which had been hidden under a bench. Forcing the judge to come with him as a hostage he made his way out of the courtroom, to where an accomplice was waiting on a motor-bike. The accomplice was wearing a smoked-glass visor on his crash-helmet. It was impossible to see his face. Besse leapt on to the back of the motor-bike and the two men tore off through the town. Witnesses, the police and the world's press all immediately jumped to the conclusion that the accomplice was Mesrine, although there was no evidence to suggest that it was. The court authorities decided that the accomplice must have posed as a court-cleaner in order to get into the court and plant the guns. It was holiday-time, they explained, and it was impossible for them to check each of the relief cleaners as thoroughly as they did for the rest of the year. This suggestion only confirmed the general belief that Mesrine was the motor-cyclist. Who else would have been able to disguise himself as a charwoman?

During the summer of 1979 those who knew Mesrine realized that he was changing. He was becoming increasingly obsessed with the fantasies about himself that he had created. He was finding it difficult to separate the legend from the truth. Friends of his have reported that there were stories about himself whose creation and subsequent embellishment they had witnessed. Mesrine believed in his lies more than anyone else did. Any suggestion, even from his closest friends, that perhaps he was exaggerating a little, could send him into an uncontrollable fury. He had always been subject to fits of rage, and these were becoming more frequent. His anger might be sparked off by something completely trivial and only last a few seconds, but during those few seconds he behaved as if possessed. He would smash everything that was in his way and it is extraordinary that he never killed anyone while in a rage.

Mesrine became increasingly isolated. It is true that he continued to rent several apartments and always made sure that he

knew his neighbours, but more of his time than ever before was spent indoors, in rooms with the blinds drawn, reading and drinking. He no longer felt that he had the freedom of the city. He became more circumspect about visiting the smartest, most public restaurants and nightclubs. He knew that the net was closing.

Friends told him of the increased pressure that was being put on them, upon everyone else who was known to have come into contact with him, by the police. Every known associate of Mesrine who had a criminal record seems to have been approached over the possibility of a 'deal'. More than ever Mesrine had to re-assess everyone he saw. He had to keep asking himself how far he could trust them, had their behaviour changed in any way? Was there anything to suggest that they were feeling guilty because they had decided to co-operate with the police? No one could be above suspicion.

Mesrine knew that he attracted loyalty from his friends and hitherto, despite his stringent security precautions, had assumed that those close to him would remain loyal. But now great pressure was being brought to bear on them. Mesrine knew that any of his associates could make a very large amount of money for information on him. He could not afford to make a single error of judgement, to miss the slightest clue that anyone was about to shop him.

He became obsessed by the idea of betrayal. He would constantly goad his friends into declarations of loyalty and affection. He was becoming increasingly introverted. The days when he would talk charmingly and brilliantly for hours were over. No longer would he discuss a painting or a building, a play or a song, luxuriating in the pleasure of discussion. The idle, throw-away charm had gone. It had been replaced by something more violent, more intense. He had become the prisoner of his own imagination and seemed to have lost the simple pleasure of being alive he had previously always felt so abundantly.

As his physical isolation grew, so did his megalomania. Mesrine's image of himself changed from the criminal superstar, the gallant hero of every thinking Frenchman, to an almost messianic role towards the end of his life. This was partly connected with his newly-found political views. In his endless monologues the imagery and the vocabulary of international socialism would recur over and over, transformed from the usual clichés into a

bizarre background for his vision of himself. He saw himself isolated on a pinnacle, with the dangers and trials of life seething all around him, ready to destroy him the moment they could. He believed strongly that he had no equals. But the bravery and talent that had made him reject the security of the world and fear nothing now made it impossible for him to take part in ordinary life.

Mesrine was drinking increasingly heavily and the more he drank the wilder his fantasies became. But it would be an unjust over-simplification to portray Mesrine at this period of life as a somewhat wild and unproductive psychopath. He never ceased to need relationships with ordinary people. When he seemed most unbalanced, when his friends were most shocked by the apparent unreason of his feverish fantasies he would suddenly insist on going out and on talking to complete strangers. He would go out in the middle of the night to Les Halles and talk to taxi-drivers, or market gardeners arriving in Paris to sell their produce. On one occasion he is said to have wandered into one of the major hospitals and pretended that he had a relation who was critically ill. He was overwhelmed by the need for normal contact with people. He craved small talk, the reassurance that there was a simple, straightforward world of ordinary people who had petty worries but carried on working and hoping that things would improve. These were not the people he hated. It was the successful middle-classes he despised, with their pretensions and their smug self-satisfaction. It was the businessmen and the technocrats, the officials and the politicians, so confident and so predictable in their ways that he felt contempt for. The earth seemed to Mesrine to have been inherited by the powers of commerce and bureaucracy. He had always got on well with ordinary people and knew that it was they who admired him.

Another reason for Mesrine's increasing sense of isolation and paranoia was that he found that he was not as financially secure as he had hoped. The bank from which Michel Lelièvre had drawn the ransom money had kept a record of the serial numbers of the bank notes. These had been circulated to every bank in the country, and even published in the national press. Mesrine would have to have the money laundered before he could use it. This would mean approaching a professional at such matters, which was no problem for Mesrine – it was exactly the sort of contact that he had built up many years before when he was in

the O.A.S. He knew several men who would be glad to arrange it for him. But the process was extremely expensive; the larger the sum involved the higher the percentage that would be lost.

The process usually entailed the agent holding on to the money for several years, until it was 'safe'. There were ways in which, with the co-operation of bankers and certain government officials, some of the currency could be slipped back into circulation without coming to the attention of the police, but the connivance of the officials would cost the launderer a great deal of money. The result of all this was that Mesrine was not rich enough to retire from crime on the proceeds of the Lelièvre kidnapping. It is unlikely that he would ever have retired, but he certainly wanted to have the choice not to have to work.

He decided that in view of the success of the Lelièvre kidnapping he would repeat the process. He had apparently had certain scruples about kidnapping and ransoming people as a way of earning money: he had kidnapped Deslauriers as revenge for sacking him, and he justified the Lelièvre snatch on the basis that it was the only way that he could earn the sort of money he needed to survive. Now that he needed more money, justifying another kidnapping to himself was not difficult.

He began to draw up a list of people whom he felt he would be idealogically justified in kidnapping. He decided on politicians, bankers, industrialists and media personalities. He opened an extraordinary set of files in which he studied in minute detail his possible victims. He gathered full biographical details, he discovered the floor-plans of their houses, the names of their children, their servants and their dogs. He amassed details of their daily routines, where they went and when, whom they saw and for how long. Mesrine soon knew the registration numbers of the cars of the victims, their families and their mistresses. The extent of his research was extraordinary. It was the sort of investigation that Mesrine enjoyed, being in possession of more information than anyone expected of him.

This was one of the pleasures he derived from his contact with ordinary people who did not know who he was. They would accept whatever he told them about himself. They would never question what his name was or his occupation. The pleasure was in the control of the situation. He alone knew the truth, while they could know only what he told them.

Mesrine kept on the move, from one flat to another. He also stayed with friends. More than ever before in his life he had to

make sure that no one knew too much about where he was, or where he would be tomorrow or the next week. In May, he had rented a third-floor studio-flat at 35–37 rue Belliard, in his favourite 18th *arrondissement*. Sylvie spent most of her time there and Mesrine would stay there two or three nights a week. He was known to the neighbours as Paul Toul, a journalist. Although he was a familiar sight to the neighbours in the rue Belliard he seems to have made fewer contacts with them than he usually had done with his neighbours while he was on the run.

With the money he had from the kidnapping of Lelièvre, Mesrine had been able to buy a flat in a luxury block at Marly-le-Roi, a pleasant little town near Versailles. It was unfurnished and needed quite a lot of work to be done to it. But Mesrine enjoyed the idea of having a flat as he wanted it, after living for so long in furnished flats. He began to decide exactly how he would like each room to be decorated.

In the summer Mesrine travelled about again. He drove across France and visited Italy and may well have crossed to Algeria. There is a suggestion that he came to England. A Belgian newspaper printed an article claiming that Mesrine had stayed with François Besse for five days in Marbella. But the holidays were not satisfactory for Mesrine. His developing obsessions with his fantasies meant that he was unable to relax as completely as he would have liked.

On his return to Paris he was happier. He had always liked the sensation of Paris in the early autumn, of the great city returning to work as its people flock back from the countryside and the beaches where they have spent August. He was feeling more optimistic. He would carry out a series of major kidnappings. He had decided that the journalist and broadcaster Philippe Bouvard should be one of his first victims. Not only was he one of the most familiar figures in France but he was known to have connections with many important political figures. To kidnap him would be a coup indeed. Mesrine saw no reason why he should not succeed. And there were not only crimes to look forward to, but decorating and furnishing the flat at Marly-le-Roi. It was possible that he would find peace there.

15

Jacques Mesrine stood up as I entered the room. It was a strange moment. For months I had been obsessed by him. All my time had been spent tracking down and talking to anyone who might know him.

Earlier that evening I met with someone I believed knew Mesrine. Out of the blue he asked whether I would like to meet Mesrine. I presumed that the question was rhetorical, but said that there was nothing I would like better. My companion then asked me to leave my coat, bag and notepad behind. I was told that I was going to be taken to meet him. I did not know whether to believe it or not. I had turned up for a drink, expecting nothing more than a new anecdote or two about Mesrine. But now I eagerly followed my companion to a car, leaving behind everything that I had been carrying as instructed. We appeared to drive in a random fashion for about twenty minutes.

Mesrine walked towards me and shook my hand as we were introduced. I was struck by how large he was and became immediately aware of the magnetism that so many people had tried to describe to me. He was smiling warmly at me. There was something imperial about him. Raising his hands like an actor backstage he laughed and said, 'Well, what do you think?' I realized that he was offering himself for my approval. It was a movingly naïve, narcissistic gesture.

Just looking at him provided the answers to so many questions that had interested me – how he moved, what he really looked like, what his facial expressions were? I asked why he had agreed to see me. He laughed, smiling lines showing at the corners of his eyes.

'Why not? You have an honest face.'

'But you didn't know that, you haven't seen me before.'

'But yes, of course. You've been trailing around for some time. Two days ago you were talking to X in the . . . I was there. I wanted to see what you looked like.'

'And you could tell from looking at me that I would not betray you?'

He shrugged. 'If I could not, would I have lived so long? Besides, how would it help you, an English journalist, to tell the

police that you saw me?' He laughed again. 'It would not even help the police. Today you see me here. Tomorrow, who knows where I will be? Not even I. Let me get you some champagne and then you can tell me what you want to know.'

He wandered out of the room and came back with a bottle and two glasses. Opening the bottle smoothly he poured the champagne and offered me a glass.

'To your good health.'

'And yours.'

'Mine?' He shrugged his shoulders. 'You'd better ask Broussard about that.'

And then we talked. Or rather Mesrine talked. It was a remarkable performance. Occasionally he stopped, courteously, to allow me to ask a question, but mostly he talked without interruption. He switched from subject to subject, explaining his attitude to life, giving details of a crime, correcting newspaper reports, describing how he had survived on the run. Sometimes he got up and went on talking as he paced the room, pausing only to peer out through the blinds or fill my glass.

He was evidently restless, pleased to have someone new to talk to about himself. Again and again he emphasized that now his back was to the wall, what happened would not be a matter of choice but necessity, dictated by his need to survive. His death he seemed to accept with an easy fatalism. His speech was mostly calm and rational, but had an intensity about it that turned each subject into a dramatic issue. It was difficult not to be a little carried away by the passion, the drama, that each moment held for him, his life always in danger. And then to be reminded of reality by the quiet, rich voice of the tall, middle-aged man, caught in a dream of himself. Each step he took outside his sanctuary was a step into enemy territory, each person he talked to presented a new danger. The chilling truth of this sank in when I caught sight of his gun. He saw my eyes flicker over the revolver strapped to his waist. 'Yes, I carry it with me everywhere. If the police come I am ready.'

'What would you like to be remembered for?'

'It is a sad question, that. Soon memories will be all that exist of me. So I suppose it is a good question. It is something that I often ask myself. In a month I may be dead. What will posterity think of me? I would like to be remembered for my honesty: for always being true to myself and my convictions, for

being afraid of nothing, for never having betrayed a friend.' There was a rare pause. 'Yes, I never lied about myself or pretended to be other than what I was.'

Mesrine's hand was never far from his gun. I could hear movement in the next-door room. My companion had left me alone with Jacques, and had gone into another room. I thought I could hear more than one person. Male voices. How many? Jacques poured some more champagne. He said that there was another bottle. He made some coffee as well. I was struck by the great pleasure he seemed to take in performing the duties of a host.

We talked about his famous ability to disguise himself. I told him that I had once successfully impersonated Akira Kurosawa, the Japanese film director. He laughed, but then told me quite seriously that women were incapable of really altering their appearance radically. He said that I probably had no idea how brilliant he really was at disguise. He pointed out that photographs of him in different disguises could not convey the way in which he changed the whole impression his body gave.

There was a long mirror on the wall and Mesrine went over to it. He stood up as straight as he could in front of it and puffed his chest out. 'Look,' he said, and then he hunched himself up, sank his head into his shoulders and let them fall forward. It was an amazing demonstration. He really did seem to have lost six inches in height and aged twenty years in two seconds. The charade continued. He showed me a workman, muscles well developed as a result of years of hard labour and a quick eye for a pretty girl passing the building site. He showed me a pious country priest, bumping into people as he walked along, mumbling his next sermon. Next Mesrine became a cripple; without even the prop of a stick he conveyed the exhausting effort that every movement involved.

Mesrine gave a commentary with each new personality, but it was hardly necessary. I was, frankly, captivated, not only by the technical skill, but the raw energy and enthusiasm. He was having fun, I realized. His boyish delight in his ability and his showing off were touching. The performance was over. I smiled and congratulated him, told him that he could have been a great actor. He basked in my praise and poured some more champagne.

'Will they make a film of your book?' he asked eagerly. I said that I hoped so.

'Wonderful. And what we must do is arrange a video-film of

me, introducing it. The film crew would not need to be large for that. It would be a sensation.'

One of the things that struck me most forcibly about Mesrine was the impression that he was, as he himself said, a caged animal. 'My existence now is better than it was in prison – I can choose what cage I live in, what I eat, what I wear. I have the dignity that belongs to a man. I can talk to women if I choose. But always, nearly always, I am surrounded by four walls. And they are closing in.'

He believed that sooner perhaps, rather than later, the police would catch up with him. He expected he would die in the streets. 'So I will end up in a coffin. So what? The policeman who fires the bullet that kills me will end up in a coffin as well. But I will have lived better. And you know what? When I am in the queue waiting to get into heaven, I will wrap a scarf around my head and when St Peter asks me my name I will say, "Mother Teresa", and walk straight past him.'

Mesrine seemed to assume that he would die in a gun battle; it was almost as if he wished it would end that way. But he did not appear to be obsessed by the idea of his death. He was much more interested in the idea of his fame. He asked me whether everyone in England had heard of him. I said that I thought they probably had. He wanted to know whether the ordinary man in the street had heard of him, as well as journalists. It seemed to matter to him that they should have done. I assured him that anyone who read newspapers would know about him. He asked me what the English thought about him. I said that I thought they were very interested but did not know very much because the press kept repeating the same few stories. He did not seem surprised.

He was anxious that the information available about him should be complete, and he wanted to know how much I knew of particular episodes in his life, so that he could fill me in on the details if necessary. He told me of the occasion when he had tried to deliver a personal letter from himself to Commissaire Broussard explaining his campaign against the top-security wings in French prisons; it was a pity, he said, that he had missed Broussard. He had managed to get into police headquarters, he told me, dressed as a messenger. He walked through part of the building, found a lavatory and altered his disguise. But he was then disconcerted to find that there were workmen

in the building and that security was tighter than he expected. 'I have always had a very good instinct that tells me when I am in danger,' he told me, 'and at that moment I sensed that something would go wrong.' So he left police headquarters without delivering his letter to Broussard.

He continued talking about himself. He told about his war with the prison authorities over prison conditions. He emphasized again and again that he had exploits lined up 'that were like nothing France has ever seen before'. He portrayed himself as a revolutionary, a freedom fighter and emphasized that it was he personally who was going to perform the deeds to shake the government. His interest seemed to be more in the development of his own legend than in the details of the cause he was fighting for.

As he spoke I realized how hard he worked, fought and played. People had told me that he never completely relaxed, that he was always pushing himself. It was as if he felt that he could never stop, or he would slip down. He believed that he was never 'off-duty', that he had always to maintain his image, to live the role he had built up for himself.

He talked about the criminal world, of his scorn for small-time criminals and his admiration for 'the real men', as he called them. He emphasized that Paris was a violent city. 'This Paris is full of killers. You English, you come here and complain about the strength of the coffee, sit in a café and go to the Louvre. Then you think you have seen life. But I could take you to a place where there are brown spots on the walls. They are blood, *chérie*. In such places people do not talk about the government, or the future of Europe. A word out of place and a gun is drawn. I know these places. I am feared now in the criminal world. I could go now to one of these places I am telling you about, with complete safety. If anyone there breathed a word about it, it would be death.'

He also talked about loyalty: 'Everyone likes to think that there is honour among thieves. But it is not usually true. I scorn these petty crooks who would sell their wives to save themselves. This is why I keep away from the *milieu*. My friends are men like myself, committed people who are fearless, but who will use any end to fight injustice.'

We had talked for about three hours. There was so much more I wanted to hear, although I was not sure I could take in and remember much more. It felt like a lifetime since I had first set

eyes on Mesrine, and it was clear that the interview was now over. He told me that I should go. I thanked him for seeing me and asked whether we might meet again. I said that it had been a great help to talk to him, but that there were still many things I would like to ask him.

'Of course. I knew you would want to see me again. This time you came to see me. Next time I will visit you in London. We will go out to dinner together. But French restaurants in London! They throw in lots of garlic and then call their stale old food "French". Why can't they understand that just a little garlic must be used with the right herbs. I hate carelessness in cookery.'

He rose and fetched the companion who had brought me to meet him. He would not come to the door and shook my hand inside the inner room we were in. 'You asked me what I want to be remembered for. Tell your readers I have the courage of their fantasies. *Au revoir*. I will see you again soon.'

The door closed behind me: the meeting was over.

I never saw him again. The net was closing in on Mesrine.

'And what have you got to report this week, M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur?'

Each Wednesday the French Cabinet met in the Murat salon of the Elysée Palace. And each week the same question was put to M. Christian Bonnet, the Minister of the Interior. It was asked with all the delicate irony Valery Giscard d'Estaing could muster, but the meaning was completely clear. 'About the Mesrine affair, to which I am sure you are referring . . .' Christian Bonnet would begin.

Invariably there was little to suggest that the situation had or would ever change. *L'affaire Mesrine* had gone on long enough. By July 1979 he was an embarrassment to both the police and the politicians as well. The President of the Republic was seriously concerned that the police were being shown to be inefficient. Mesrine was now getting more press coverage than Giscard himself.

The official story was always the same: it was only a matter of time before he was caught. With such brilliant detectives as Broussard, Devos and Aimé-Blanc, each the head of a large department, they would catch him as soon as he made a mistake. And even Mesrine occasionally made a mistake.

The key to their failure so far to find him lay in the fact that

each of the police forces of France were looking for him. Different branches were competing with each other in the attempt to catch him and, so keen were they all for the glory of getting him, they were not always enthusiastic about helping one another. This competition, which ministers brushed aside with pat phrases about 'healthy rivalry' reached the point that the Brigade Territoriale refused to co-operate at all with Broussard's B.R.I. (anti-gangs squad).

The most prestigious arm of the police force concerned with the case was the Paris Préfecture, formerly independent, but supposedly merged with the rest of the Police Judiciaire in 1966. The Préfecture had retained, despite the merger, some of the arrogance and much of the brilliance that had always characterized it. Two units of the Préfecture deal with major crimes – the B.R.I. led by the famous Commissaire Broussard, and the B.R.B. led by the almost equally distinguished Commissaire Devos. Both Broussard and Devos are old-style policemen of the best sort: tough, efficient and totally incorruptible. Broussard is one of the last in the long tradition of public-personality 'super-flics'. His name is familiar to every reader of the French press and his blond, bearded face is a familiar sight. For millions of people he seems close to a real life cross between Starsky and Maigret. In the public imagination he was now identified as Mesrine's adversary, particularly since the 1973 arrest when Mesrine had greeted him with champagne.

The traditional rival of the Préfecture is the Sûreté, France's national police organization with its headquarters in the rue Saussaies in Paris. This central office houses the high-powered O.C.R.B. (Office Centrale de Repression de Banditisme) which deals with serious crimes. The O.C.R.B. chief is Lucien Aimé-Blanc and his second-in-command is Charles Pellegrini. These are two of the new breed of policemen. They are equally at home in the underworld, extracting rumours and maintaining contact with informants, and in the fast-moving world of police technology and the latest forensic developments. Aimé-Blanc had worked in his native Marseilles before coming to Paris to head the O.C.R.B. He is a large, hot-tempered man, with quick, animal reflexes. Mesrine had a high regard for him: 'He's a fine policeman. One of these days I will meet him in the street. Only one of us will survive.' Aimé-Blanc, not as familiar a personality to the French public as Broussard, had several notable successes before reaching Paris, including the smashing of a major Marseilles drug-

ring. His deputy, Pellegrini, is a very different but no less talented policeman. He comes from an old Corsican family and was a Commando officer before joining the police. He is tall and lean, wears steel-rimmed spectacles and has an inscrutable smile. Together Aimé-Blanc and Pellegrini made a formidable pair, instinct and reason in harness.

The competition between the Préfecture and the O.C.R.B., known to themselves as the 'Broussards' and the 'Pellegrinis', was complicated still further by the involvement of the provincial police forces. These were the gendarmerie (under the authority of the Ministry of Defence) and the regional branches of the 'Police Judiciaire'. Both these forces resented 'helpful' interference from their Parisian colleagues in crimes committed outside Paris.

Each of these different units was working on the case separately. The longer Mesrine remained free the more intense and hostile the rivalry became. The kidnapping of Lelièvre had brought matters to a head. The size of the ransom demanded was alarming as it meant that Mesrine would be able to afford to retire. The main chance that the authorities would get of catching him would be during one of his crimes. If he ceased working it would be easier for him to remain free. The alternative was equally worrying to them: instead of retiring, Mesrine might decide to arrange other kidnappings.

There were suggestions in the French press that Mesrine had not been caught because certain important people did not want him to be caught. It was said that Mesrine had friends in the police and the administration. The allegations were unproven, but Mesrine had remained free for so long, had had so many apparently miraculous escapes, that people were ready to believe any explanation of his incredible luck. His public was beginning to 'hope' that he could do almost anything.

It was summer, 1979. As always, the Parisians had abandoned the city to the tourists. Giscard d'Estaing went down to Bregancon, in the south of France. It is said that a few days after Giscard's arrival Mesrine was the subject of a conversation at a dinner party. The other guests were discussing Mesrine, swapping stories about him, many of them no doubt apocryphal. Roars of laughter at the exploits of the criminal and the flat-footedness of the police echoed round the table. The President is supposed to have stormed out of the party in disgust.

A few days later he arranged a dinner at one of France's finest

restaurants, the Oasis at La Napoule. This was an annual event in which Giscard met with some of the important local politicians and old friends. Among those invited was Michel Poniatowski, who had been Minister of the Interior in the Chirac administration. Inevitably discussion turned to Mesrine. 'Ponia' was sure that he knew what the problem was. It was a problem that he had wrestled with himself, the fragmentation of the French police forces. He said he could identify the root of the difficulty. For the sake of the government, Mesrine must be recaptured. The continued humiliation of the police forces was undermining the credibility of the whole administration. Giscard was pleased by Poniatowski's attitude. It was the articulation of his own half-formed conclusions.

Later that same evening the telephone rang in the house of the Minister of the Interior. He picked it up and was astonished to hear the dry voice of the President. 'Bonnet? About Mesrine . . .' The message was simple. Giscard was issuing an ultimatum. It was now a matter of Mesrine or Bonnet. Either the criminal was captured or the Minister of the Interior would be looking for a new job. The conversation was brief. The President wished his Minister a good night and hung up.

Christian Bonnet cancelled his holiday to Brittany. The next day he summoned the director of the Police Judiciaire to his office in the Place Beauveau. Within minutes an official car swept out of the police headquarters on the Quai des Orfèvres. Soon it passed the Elysée Palace and drove in through the wrought-iron gates of the Ministry of the Interior.

Maurice Bouvier is perhaps the most famous policeman in France, with a string of notable successes behind him including the smashing of O.A.S. terrorism in France in the early sixties. It was he who arrested those responsible for the attempted assassination of de Gaulle at Petit-Clamart in 1962. He is a quiet man who speaks only when he has to. He is honest, scrupulous, somewhat misanthropic. He listened intently as Bonnet spoke. In the distance the sounds of the Paris traffic screeched and droned. The director of the Police Judiciaire was undismayed by the Minister's passion. This was the moment he had been waiting for. Bouvier removed his foul-smelling pipe from his mouth and, holding the bowl of the pipe, he outlined his plan:

'The solution is simple. We must start at the beginning again. We must unite the resources of the different services: they must be welded into a single force. They will need discipline. You

must put one man in charge of the whole operation. I suggest myself for the job on condition that everyone, and that includes the gendarmerie comes under my authority.'

A week later, on 10 August, the heads of all the police forces in France gathered together in the offices of the Prime Minister in the Hôtel Matignon. It was the culmination of a week of intense negotiation between M. Bonnet, Maurice Bouvier, and Christian Barbeau, the head of the gendarmerie. Broussard was there, from the 'anti-gangs', and Serge Devos of the B. R. B. The head of the O. C. R. B., Lucien Aimé-Blanc sat next to Barbeau.

They were all being given their orders by M. Barre, the Prime Minister. In the room where Talleyrand had entertained Heads of State, and where Reynaud had contemplated the Fall of France, the anti-Mesrine squad was born. Those present were told that the attempt to catch Jacques Mesrine must have priority over everything else. The squad was to consist of the B. R. I., the B. R. B. and the O. C. R. B., essentially the three forces concerned with serious crime. This new force was to have the total co-operation of the gendarmerie. Every day, every senior person in the squad was to report to Bouvier and receive orders for the following day. Every Tuesday, there was to be a meeting of Bouvier and the three heads of departments, Broussard, Devos and Aimé-Blanc. Developments and strategy were to be discussed. They were to trace and follow anyone who had ever had any contact with Mesrine – criminals he had worked with, everyone he might have talked to in prison, his family, his friends, journalists who might have had some contact with him. Everyone and anyone.

For a month there was little progress to report. Then a major storm broke. Jacques Tillier, a journalist for the right-wing paper *Minute*, was found badly wounded by the roadside in the forest of Halatte, near Senlis. He claimed that he had been shot by Mesrine and left for dead.

The police had known for some time that Tillier had been trying to contact Mesrine, but none of those involved in Bouvier's 'anti-Mesrine' squad had had any idea that he had managed to arrange a meeting with the criminal.

The affair was puzzling for several reasons. Firstly, the action was uncharacteristic of Mesrine. Why should he try to kill a journalist, when he had always carefully nurtured his relations with the press? Secondly, if Mesrine had wanted to kill Tillier, why had he failed? He was known to be an expert marksman.

The next day there was a new development. Mesrine wrote to the newspapers, hotly contesting Tillier's version of the story. He was, said Mesrine, a police spy whom he had decided to punish. He intended to torture him, but not to kill him.

The complete truth of the affair remains unclear. Tillier was questioned about it at considerable length. What particularly interested the police was that Mesrine apparently had an accomplice and the police were very keen to identify him. If they could find the man Mesrine was working with, he might lead them to Mesrine himself. It was the only lead they had and they were desperate for a new angle, something they could follow up. However, it did not seem to be too promising. All that Tillier could tell them was that the second man was about thirty-five, with a small black moustache and a Marseilles accent. Then Tillier recalled that he had rolled his own cigarettes. When pressed he remembered that he had talked, like Mesrine, of the atrocities of the top-security wings. He had used the same left-wing clichés as Mesrine, and had accused Tillier of being a 'fascist'. This suggested to the police that Mesrine's accomplice had himself been in a top-security wing at some stage. It was well known to the authorities that the political consciousness of the inmates of these wings was usually more developed than that of the ordinary criminal.

The police realized that this could be an important clue. It narrowed the search down considerably. A massive, tightly-co-ordinated operation was set into motion to find the accomplice. Of the hundred or so men who had been in one of the maximum security wings and were now free, about eighty could be ruled out on the grounds of their physical appearance. That left about twenty, all of whom the police tried to trace. Soon the number was whittled down to about six or seven possibles.

One name particularly interested the investigators. It was that of Charly Bauer, a Marseilles criminal sentenced to twenty years for armed robbery, and released after sixteen years with remission for good behaviour. His prison psychiatric report indicated that he had a certain 'political culture'. The police wanted to find out who was responsible for his political education.

It appeared that he had been visited frequently in prison in Caen by a teacher, Renée Gindrat. Further inquiries enabled the police to discover that after Bauer's release he had gone to live with her. She was supposed to be on sick leave from her job;

but she had disappeared from home, and her family had no idea of her whereabouts. After his release Bauer had worked as a librarian and he and Renée had had a daughter, Sarah, who was now sixteen months old. But none of this information helped the police particularly. Renée and Charly both seemed to have disappeared

Then Lucien Aimé-Blanc had a brain-wave. He contacted the M.A.I.F., the life assurance association for teachers, to see whether they had any information about her. This time the police struck lucky. Mlle Gindrat had a car insured with the M.A.I.F. – or rather two cars, a Ford Transit van, and a Renault 14. The insurance department was also able to give them the registration numbers and an address. The address proved to be useless – it was simply a mail-box near the Place Clichy in Paris.

A nationwide hunt was set up for the two cars. It was discovered that the Renault had been booked several times for parking offences in the area of Gare St Lazare, one of the main railway stations in Paris. The police intensified the search for the car in this area. Finally, on 24 October, the car was spotted, parked on the pavement near the Church of the Holy Trinity! The policeman who spotted it immediately radioed headquarters and within minutes an unmarked car was in the area, waiting to follow the Renault.

At the end of the afternoon a woman came along, got into the car and drove away. She was followed to 101, rue St Lazare. The *concierge*, who was a policeman's widow, told the police that the woman lived on the sixth floor with a young man. They seldom went out, she said. From then on the house was kept under surveillance twenty-four hours a day. It was watched from flats opposite, from delivery vans in the street and by 'pedestrians'.

The next day the driver of the Renault came out of the building. With her was a man of average height, with dark eyes and a moustache. It was Bauer. The police believed that they might be getting close. They now had to keep a watch on Bauer and hope that he would lead them to Mesrine. The watching and waiting went on for a week. There was the possibility, they all knew, that Bauer and Renée were not in contact with Mesrine after all. That would mean they had to go back to square one. And the success of the operation had by now become vital to every man involved in it.

On 31 October Renée and Bauer left the flat again. They got into their Renault and drove off. Their tail followed them. For

some time they drove around the streets of Montmartre and then turned into a street in the 18th *arrondissement*, the rue Belliard. They stopped outside a number 35–37 and went inside. Following Bauer and Renée had become routine. They were not expecting anything startling to happen. A few minutes later Bauer and Renée came out of the block of flats with another couple. The man was large, heavy-jowled and old. He was walking with a stick. One of the policemen frowned. He had been there when Mesrine had been arrested in 1973. He would know the build anywhere. It *was* him. And the girl, in spite of her blonde wig and glasses, which made her look like a frumpy student, was Sylvie Jeanjacquot.

The instant that they recognized Mesrine the two young policemen radioed the news to headquarters using the special codes they had been given. While they waited for senior officers to arrive they kept the two couples under surveillance. It was only a couple of minutes before Broussard and Pellegrini arrived on the scene. The junior officers were told to keep out of the way and draft in reinforcements – men and unmarked cars.

Then began one of the most extraordinary walks in criminal history. The two couples proceeded through the crowded streets towards the market in the boulevard Ornane, pausing to look in shop windows. Behind them were the two 'superflics', dressed in jeans and scruffy shirts, beneath which they wore bullet-proof vests. They hovered behind, as close as they dared. Mesrine and his friends wandered into a furniture shop, where Mesrine ordered a sofa costing 30,000 francs (which he paid for in cash) to be delivered to his new retreat at 41 avenue Auguste-Renoir in Marly-le-Roi.

The two couples moved on, stopping at a chemist, a grocery store and a baker. They were faithfully followed by the two police detectives. Then the couples separated – Bauer and Renée Gindrat returned to 35–37 rue Belliard with the provisions, while Sylvie and Mesrine continued their stroll. Pellegrini and Broussard were only a few yards from their quarry. The situation was so painfully tantalizing. Here at last they had the most wanted man in Europe just a few feet in front of them. But they did not dare try to arrest him yet. They knew he would be armed and they could not risk a shoot-out on a Paris pavement.

Sylvie was now walking behind Mesrine, now in front, making it easier to detect if one is being followed. Hanging from Sylvie's shoulder was a black bag. Broussard and Pellegrini believed it

contained the grenades that Mesrine had said he would use if the police caught up with him. Mesrine's hand never left the inside pocket of his jacket.

Then Mesrine stopped in front of a shoeshop. Then he entered it. Pellegrini and Broussard slipped into the police observation van that was following them. Through an observation hole in the back they could see into the shop. Mesrine had taken his shoes off and was trying on a new pair. His hand had left his pocket. Sylvie, with the bag, was out of reach. It was an ideal moment to take him. Broussard and Pellegrini leapt from the van. But before they had entered the shop, Mesrine had put his shoes on and got up.

The two policemen hesitated. It was no good. The moment had passed. Now he was in a position to defend himself. They left the shop and strolled back towards rue Belliard, the two detectives following them.

A watch had already been set up outside the house. Neighbouring flats, belonging to civil servants (supposedly reliable) were taken over. There were about forty policemen now in the immediate vicinity of the street. A dozen women wandered up and down the street, some disguised as prostitutes looking for trade, others as housewives going shopping or nuns collecting for charity. There were road-sweepers, dustmen, drivers delivering groceries. All of them carried guns and wirelesses which kept them in constant touch with Bouvier at headquarters. Without anyone being aware of it, the entire street had been completely taken over by the police. Parked around the corner, in case he should attempt to drive away, were five police vans, with marksmen in each one.

The question facing the police was what to do next. One possibility was a straightforward raid, in the hope that they could seize Mesrine before he killed too many of them. But none of the senior policemen involved dared risk the lives of their men like that. Mesrine had made it quite clear he would try to shoot his way out if he was arrested again. There was no reason not to believe him.

An alternative would be to station a marksman with a high-velocity rifle in the building which faced the windows so that when Mesrine came into view he could be shot from safety. But the distance would be too great for certainty – they would have to aim across two roads and a railway line, about 100 yards. The consequences of missing could be disastrous. The police still felt

they had to make it look as if they were shooting in self-defence.

They decided they would have to wait for their opportunity to strike. The senior men in the Mesrine squad, Broussard, Aimé-Blanc, Pellegrini and Devos, debated the situation; and in overall charge was Bouvier. He was kept constantly in touch with the situation.

The waiting was unbearable. No one came out of the flat during the night of the 31st. No one in the Mesrine squad slept. They were sure that 1 November would be the day. Excitement and tension mounted for the police. Every minute of the day dozens of pairs of eyes were fixed on the door of Mesrine's building. The morning passed. Surely Jacques and Sylvie would go out sometime? There was no sign of activity. It was possible that Mesrine realized that he was being followed and would try to get out of the building some other way. With him anything was possible. This time he must not get away.

The dozens of plain-clothes operatives, the marksmen, the uniformed men hidden in nearby streets, the Minister of the Interior, the President: throughout Thursday there was continuous radio communication on special wavelengths between all concerned. But the message was always the same – '*Rien*'. Nothing. There was nothing to report because nothing was happening.

The day went by and night came. Should the police, after all, go in? It was decided that they should wait. The men in charge of the operation had had no sleep for thirty-six hours. Tempers became frayed. The junior officers came and went, shift after shift. Many begged to stay on duty, desperate to be in at the end, whenever and whatever that was going to be. But they were told that it would be too dangerous to have them around with their reactions slowed down by exhaustion. Only the men in charge were allowed to remain sleepless at the scene of inaction.

The next day came. Friday, 2 November – All Souls' Day – 1979. During the early hours of the morning it had been decided that if Mesrine had not left the flat by six o'clock that evening the police would have to go in. If he did leave the flat, the police had a plan worked out. They believed now that there was only one way to do it.

At 2.58 p.m. the front door of 35–37 rue Belliard opened. An anxious young policeman, a radio-operator in a van opposite, lowered his voice to a whisper as he reported what was happening.

Mesrine had appeared in the doorway. He was wearing a

leather jacket and grey trousers. He was carrying a suitcase and a couple of overcoats. Sylvie Jeanjacquot followed, in a grey skirt and blouse. She was clutching her miniature poodle to her chest. They walked over to their car, chatting as they went.

They were on their way to spend the weekend at their new flat in Marly-Le-Roi, the place where Mesrine hoped he would find peace at last.

His trademark was a daring that took your breath away—

he was ruthless, contemptuous and a killer, he was a dashing lover, a master of disguise and escape and the possessor of nine lives — or so it seemed.

Jacques Mesrine

To some he was France's Public Enemy Number One, to others 'the Robin Hood of the Paris Streets'.

What was he? A latter-day hero or a common criminal with a run of luck against an incompetent police force? Carey Schofield's exciting book traces Mesrine's extraordinary career — army life in Algeria, the first steps in crime, the murders, the escapes and the love affairs. Her book reveals a great deal never before published, including some things that people would prefer to forget.

Photograph of the author by Timothy Beddow

United Kingdom